
Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis

Jeanne Boydston

Almost twenty years ago, in a little-noticed paper for an American Council of Learned Societies conference, historian of American slavery Barbara Jeanne Fields went on record as an abiding sceptic of 'categories of analysis'. 'The phrase itself – categories of analysis – has a dry, ugly sound to my ears', she confided. 'When I encounter the phrase . . . in the opening pages of a book that I am not professionally obligated to read, I put the book down immediately'. 'If not kept strictly in their place', she cautioned, 'they get above themselves and go masquerading as persons, mingling on equal terms with human beings and sometimes crowding them out altogether'.¹

Of course Fields wrote partly (not entirely) tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless, when I first came across the piece in the early 1990s, I was dismayed. At the time, the project of consciously and carefully delineating categories of historical analysis – race, class, nation, identity and, in my field, gender – promised an ever more nuanced history of power and resistance, one in which subjects that had been rendered unseen or unintelligible by the terms of older frameworks would become visible in dramatically new and significant ways. Like many others, I thought that not only the future of my field but its very vindication *as* a field lay in that project. I was disappointed to find a historian I admired as much as Fields demurring at the prospect.

Now, twenty years later, my enthusiasm for categories of analysis has cooled considerably, and particularly for the reigning category of analysis of my own field, *gender*. Given the lingering controversy over the naming of the field, I want to be clear that it is not the substitution of 'gender' for 'women' that concerns me. My complaint is not that 'gender' history has distracted us from the important work of recovering 'women's' history. Much of that project does remain undone, but I am not convinced that focusing on 'gender' (as opposed to 'women') impedes us from doing it. Neither am I unhappy about including males in what we once called 'women's history' or about investigating the histories of manhood/masculinities as well as womanhood/femininities.² The worlds of females – at their most communal and institutional and at their most intimate, at their most fragile and at their most potent – have included males. The cultural processes that have produced 'women' have also produced 'men'. Gender is the concept in our current practice that encompasses this relational dynamic. It seems useful to shift the name of the field, from women's history to gender history, to reflect this. And as I hope is clear both from this essay and my larger work, in expressing my present concerns, I in no way suggest that we should cease examining the ways in which the construction of gender has occurred and been important in the history of human societies.

What I do worry about – what gives Fields's essay its present salience for me – is that, as a category of analysis, gender may be functioning in our work in just the sorts of ways she deplored. There is a difference between a concept – theorised but uninstitutionalised, advanced but still in motion – and a more fixed and furnished category of analysis. Even as a concept, 'gender' has been the subject of almost continuous debate in the field of women's and gender history (although this discussion has become less welcome, it seems to me, since we began to deploy gender as a category of analysis). Over the years, we have struggled with limited success to problematise the relation of 'gender' as a social construction to designated 'male' and 'female' bodies; too often, we assume that whatever female people do *is* 'femininity' and whatever male people do *is* 'masculinity'. We have argued without much resolution over the possibilities for theorising gender in other than binary and oppositional terms (or in terms of a continuum on which the poles remain 'male' and 'female'). Perhaps of greatest concern to me, although we have argued for 'gender' as a historical process, we have frequently treated that process as non-historically-contingent – that is, as unfolding in much the same way and in much the same terms in all societies. We have largely disregarded the very local and particular character of the concept as most of us have come to understand and use it – *local* to the cultures of the twentieth-century United States and western Europe and particular to the nature and struggles for power within those cultures. These, I think, remain critical points of interrogation for the *concept* itself.

In claiming that same concept as a broad category of analysis, we have done nothing to resolve those issues. If anything, by our inattention we have further secured them as silent biases in our work, accepting a flattening of complex historical processes and meanings, and fostering a uniformity in the history whose resistances and irregularities we seek to understand. Everywhere invoked, almost regardless of the time, place or culture under investigation, as a category of analysis gender seems almost nowhere critically reassessed with respect to time, place and culture. In a sense, relying on gender as a *category of historical analysis* has stymied our efforts to write a history – or many histories – of *gender as historical process*. In Fields's words, as a category of analysis gender now goes rather haughtily 'masquerading' as historical subjects, 'mingling on equal terms' with historical actors and processes 'and sometimes crowding them out altogether'.

In the essay that follows, I explore these reservations in greater conceptual and historical detail. I ask what it means to name a particular concept a 'category of analysis' and revisit the process through which particularly American feminist historians came to understand 'gender' in that way. I note some of the broad areas of historical research that have been stymied by this practice – including the study of gender in twentieth-century western Europe and the United States, the very places and times where, if anywhere, such a category should work best. In a more extended examination of my own field of expertise, early American history, I seek both to comment on the interpretative limitations imposed by the current widespread understanding of gender as a category of analysis and to suggest alternative ways of understanding the history of gender in this place and period. Finally, I speculate on new conceptual approaches to gender history, asking for a praxis that refuses gender as a set of more or less universalised assumptions and, instead, always interrogates it anew as a set of relatively open questions applied to a discrete time and place of inquiry.

It is useful, I think, to begin that discussion by asking just what a category of analysis *is*. How is it constituted, and what work do we expect it to do?

Categories of analysis are *subjective*, fashioned in the critical minds of historians to help us identify, organise and assess certain kinds of evidence of particular interest to us. Thus, although they may carry an urgency for us that makes them appear both natural and inevitable, categories of analysis are always contemporary, constituted in and marked by the present – our present as historians. (Obviously, we perceive evidence of our categories in our sources, but that perception is itself at least in part an act of constitution.) This temporality is by no means a fatal flaw in the usefulness of categories for historians. Quite the contrary, to suggest that categories of analysis exist *a priori* in the sources and have merely to be revealed (like a Michelangelo sculpture imprisoned in the marble) is to misunderstand the character of history as a discipline and to misrepresent the role of the historian as a maker of meaning.

Nevertheless, the fact of particularity should give us pause. Categories of analysis are not analytically neutral. They are not mere frameworks for organising ideas. They are frameworks that reflect and replicate our own understandings of the world. The moment we cease to acknowledge that aspect of their work and invest any particular category of analysis with the authority of permanence and universality, we cease to be historians and become propagandists of a particular epistemological order.

And yet the very process of categorisation – the naming of an abstracted class – is inherently a simplifying, consolidating and universalising process. These qualities, too, are a part of the usefulness of categories, the whole purpose of which is to bring order and meaning to an otherwise unruly tangle of data and permit us to hold steady the otherwise constant flurry of difference and change. On the other hand, these qualities remove categories from ‘real’ time and space and locate them in a type of critical utopia. They tend to reduce the mess and variability of lived experience to a few elements that are allowed to stand, falsely, as a substitute for that experience, and to collapse complicated and distinct historical processes into stable, materialised representations. When we use a category of analysis we authorise that process of reduction, with all of its numerous and inevitable concealments and misrepresentations. Of course, merely using the category does not absolutely preclude us from noticing anomalies in our field of analysis but, as the episteme of the analysis, the reason-imbuing framework, a category of analysis can mark whatever is beyond it as irrational and nonsensical, an annoyance to be either fitted into the category or purged as irrelevant.

But the anomalies are just what ought to interest us as historians – not so we can figure a way to force them to conform to the framework, but because they disrupt the common sense of the framework and may signal that something is being missed or suppressed within it. For historians, that ‘something’ is likely to be local practice, the ground of particular, historical time and space that marks the insufficiency of the category’s truth-claims. The anomalies may be quite small (an unexpected combination of symbols) or more glaring (a dramatic exception to the category’s rule). They may turn out to be constitutive of the category, in the sense that the plausibility of any category of analysis resides in part on its capacity to exclude. Often, however, irregularities point to more fundamental problems in the category itself.

Identifying the practices that are incomprehensible within our framework is hard work – harder the more deeply a category has become ingrained in the practice of the field. A particular category of gender has become the common sense for our work as gender historians. And yet the rewards can be considerable. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, only by a break with the categorical vision, ‘which is experienced as a break with ordinary vision’, can we begin to bring the anomalies into clearer view.³

The current ‘ordinary’ understanding of gender as a category of historical analysis stems from late twentieth-century feminist political mobilisation in Europe and the United States, within which the field of women’s history developed as both product and practice.⁴ Although early women’s historians were far more likely to employ the category ‘woman’ (‘woman’s roles’ or ‘perceptions of woman’ or ‘myths about woman’) than the analytical language of ‘gender’,⁵ most embraced an idea of gender roughly akin to Gayle Rubin’s classic early formulation: that ‘in every society’ there is ‘a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation (*sex*) is shaped by human, social intervention (*gender*)’.⁶ It was the work of feminism to expose those gender systems and redress their injustices to women (later, to men as well as women). In this context, it was the work of *women’s historians* to discover and reveal such patterns in the past (including in the ways historians had written about the past), to return women and women’s activities to the historical record and to illuminate the ways in which women in the past had attempted to resist sexual oppression in the societies within which they lived.

The distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ remained common in feminist organising and history, but the framework was not without its critics, especially among theorists who questioned whether even physical bodies were not bearers of purely socially constructed meanings. However, in part because the field of women’s history originated in the methods of social history, in part because early women’s history did not seriously interrogate bodies as a historical subject, most early women’s historians did not directly confront the dilemmas of the sex/gender distinction, which continued to inform the assumptions of their work. The period from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s certainly saw a lot of theorising about ‘gender’ among women’s historians, but the emphasis was not on problematising the term ‘gender’ itself so much as it was on problematising the relation of gender to other categories, particularly class and patriarchy.⁷ In many ways potentially very useful, most efforts of this sort continued to conceptualise gender, class and other social processes as conceptually distinct, making it difficult to capture the complexity and particularity of their unified processes in a given historical circumstance. In the absence of a constitutively ‘raced’ concept of gender, for example, gender always reflected the racial systems of western European culture and reverted to the implicitly white position.

By the 1980s, it was becoming more difficult for women’s historians to avoid re-evaluating the way they used the concept ‘gender’. Although the fuller investigation of these points would follow in theorising ‘intersectionality’ and in the studies of gender and colonialism of the 1990s, scholars of race and slavery in Europe and the Americas were vigorous in pointing out that the bodies of women of colour had been socially constructed to meet the interests of Europeans since the first colonial contacts.⁸ ‘Stand point’ theory, which questioned the adequacy of generalised and abstracted categories

for capturing the distinctive processes of forms of oppression and privilege in a woman's experience, was one response to these criticisms of mainstream feminist analysis.⁹

Several additional circumstances specific to the academy in the 1980s gave urgency to the quest for a more deeply theorised concept of gender in the field of women's history. The field was thriving. By the 1980s, it supported influential journals in the United States and Europe, and works in women's history were beginning to appear on the lists of prominent publishers and in prominent general historical journals. The sheer volume of production seemed to require some greater consistency of terms. In the academy, the legitimacy of the field of women's history and of women's historians was under almost constant attack. In particular, women's history was dismissed as narrow, over-specialised and immaterial to the truly important matter of history (framed in seemingly neutral terms as politics, war and so forth, but more accurately defined as the actions of males) and women's historians were accused of trying to fashion their own personal frustrations into a respected academic field. A more unified concept of gender, detached from the heat of activism and justified instead as one of the fundamental organising categories of history, might provide legitimacy for the field and its practitioners.

Here entered the matter of the 'category of analysis'. If gender could be argued to be a key field of experience for both men and women – for *all* people – then one might posit gender as a subject of universal relevance. This was the political context for Joan Wallach Scott's splendid essay, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', which opened the December 1986 issue of the *American Historical Review*, a commanding placement in a flagship journal of the profession. As Scott noted, 'The proliferation of case studies in women's history seems to call for some synthesizing perspective' and 'the discrepancy between the high quality of recent work in women's history and the continuing marginal status of the field as a whole . . . points up the limits of descriptive approaches that do not address dominant disciplinary concepts . . . in terms that can shake their power and perhaps transform them'.¹⁰

Scott's broad purpose was to examine the implications of feminists' growing tendency 'to use "gender" as a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes', and to offer a 'useable theoretical formulation' of gender as a category of historical analysis. She devoted the first half of the essay to an assessment of the main schools of feminist theorising in the 1960s and 1970s – all of which seemed to her 'limited at best because they tend to contain reductive or overly simple generalizations that undercut not only history's disciplinary sense of the complexity of social causation but also feminist commitments to analyses that will lead to change'.¹¹ Patriarchal theory claimed universal primacy for gender as an analytical category (with little attention to its relationship to other oppressions) and assumed 'a consistent or inherent meaning' for the physical differences between males and females; it rendered history 'in a sense, epiphenomenal, providing endless variations on the unchanging theme of a fixed gender inequality'.¹² Marxist theories suffered from something of the opposite problem: they had trouble formulating any independent analytical status for gender at all. Everything was 'the by-product of changing economic structures'.¹³ Although her specific criticisms of different schools of psychoanalytic theory varied, Scott found in all of them 'the tendency to reify subjectively originating antagonism between males and females' and 'to universalize the categories and relationship of male and female'.¹⁴ The ability of the field to define its own boundaries and at the

same time to challenge 'non-feminist historians' depended on 'gender as an analytic category'.¹⁵ The challenge was to formulate a concept of gender that could be used as an independent category of analysis, yet rejected 'the fixing of the binary opposition of male and female as the only possible relationship and as a permanent aspect of the human condition'.¹⁶

The category Scott herself offered did not resolve these issues, however. Although much of the article was devoted to the inadequacies of specific social scientific methodologies for the historical study of gender, Scott did not reject the social science model *per se*. Finding that gender theorising 'is often not done precisely or systematically',¹⁷ she fashioned her definition on the model of a scientific claim, with the implications of neutrality and universality implied by that form: gender had two parts and four subparts, identifiable and structurally consistent (although with some operational variation).¹⁸

Far from dislodging the binary, the first part of the definition restated it: 'gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes'.¹⁹ This approach complicated the 'sex/gender distinction' by deflecting analysis from the *naturalised* body to the *perceived* body, but this was a deflection, not a displacement, for perception now became the real subject. If perception is the ground of politics and if people *perceive* male and female bodies as gendered in a binary opposition (which seems to be what Scott meant when she paraphrased Bourdieu to the effect that 'established as an objective set of references, concepts of gender structure perception and the concrete and symbolic organization of all social life'),²⁰ then we are left once again with a concept of gender as a natural oppositional binary: gender is as much hard-wired in the human psyche as Freud would have had it hard-wired in the human anatomy. Scott did offer a theory of variability. The four subparts to her first proposition (culturally available symbols, normative concepts that interpret those symbols, politics and social institutions, and organisations that structure these normative concepts in daily life and subjective identity) operate simultaneously but with changing and culturally distinct intensities.²¹ None of them, however, altered the fundamental binary structure of gender itself. Gender history would be the story of their complex and altering interplay but these would be variations within an enduring oppositional configuration of gender.

Scott's second proposition provided that 'gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power'. As became clear in her discussion of this proposition, Scott's approach was marked by a twentieth-century, western conception of the nature of power, associated especially with the work of Michel Foucault and the Frankfurt school. Power, in this formulation, is by definition a process of creating advantage – the 'differential control over or access to material and symbolic resources' – with the goal of exercising dominion.²² (What game theorists call a 'Pareto improvement', a deployment of power that benefits one site without disadvantaging others, is largely unthinkable within this framework.) Foucauldian power is also often insinuating in its mechanics, operating through socially dispersed forms of interiorised self-discipline that are fundamentally western European and bourgeois. Within this frame, claims to freedom are illusory and in fact serve to entrench a totalising regime. This approach to power had important implications for Scott's model of gender: it further secured a binary, oppositional framework for thinking about matters of male and female, and it virtually ruled out (as naïve) distinctions between male and female that might not be about this kind of differentiating power. Within this category, it is difficult to imagine distinctions

between males and females that are not invidious to one or the other group, and thus correspondingly difficult to conceive of distinctions that do not register as primary axes for allocating authority.

One way of reading this definition of gender as a category of analysis is, of course that, if the perceptions of male and female bodies in a given historical circumstance are *not* perceptions of binary difference and/or do not function as vehicles of domination, then the process under study is *not* gender. I'll return to this later. Let me just note here that such a definition would relegate cultures not characterised by the oppositional binary to a strange negative historical and intellectual space, as *the non-gendered Other* – the absence of a specific western gender formation adding to their strangeness rather than raising questions of the adequacy of the category.

Powerful and timely, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' was soon being cited everywhere, albeit often without the critical reading the essay deserved. Scott herself returned to these matters in several essays – perhaps most importantly in 'Some More Reflections on Gender and Politics' (1999). Here, Scott recognised the persisting problems in gender historians' theorising of gender as a category, and, indeed, seemed to back away from some of the categorical claims of the first essay. She noted the 'universalizing impulses of both feminism . . . and social science and the tendency to treat "national and/or cultural differences . . . as second-order phenomena" to an assumed "self-evident . . . fundamental difference of 'women' from 'men'"'. Scott explicitly rejected analyses that employ gender to mean 'a set of fixed oppositional categories, male and female'. And yet, in its emphasis on investigating 'how sexual difference is constituted by politics (how, to put it another way, masculinity is secured by attributing its antithesis to femininity and in what terms)', the essay seems to restate just such a configuration of gender. Perhaps for this reason, 'Reflections' seems not to have provoked the 'critical reassessment, if not revision and reconceptualisation, of the terms that have been most used in our analysis', as Scott hoped.²³

Still, that reassessment has been ongoing. A number of non-western historians argue that not all societies have been organised on the basis of gender, at least not 'gender' in the way implied in the work of most western historians. Among the most outspoken scholars on the subject is African historian Oyèrónké Oyewùmí. Oyewùmí argues that western work on gender has been, and continues to be, preoccupied with the oppositionally-sexed body, which – as literal body or as representation – inhabits the category 'gender' and invests it with a rigid corporeal determinism. But this valorisation of the body is not universal. On the contrary, it is historically specific to European cultures and western history. Here Oyewùmí takes the step clearly implied in social constructionist thought, but seldom taken by social constructionists:

If gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space. If gender is a social construction, then we must examine the various cultural/architectural sites where it was constructed, and we must acknowledge that variously located actors (aggregates, groups, interested parties) were part of the construction. We must further acknowledge that if gender is a social construction, then there was a specific time (in different cultural/architectural sites) when it was 'constructed' and therefore a time before which it was not. Thus, gender, being a social construction, is also a historical and cultural phenomenon.

‘Consequently’, she concludes, ‘it is logical to assume that in some societies, gender construction need not have existed at all’.²⁴

Wonderfully provocative as this conclusion is, it seems to me both to exceed Oyewùmí’s evidence and to obscure her most interesting argument, which (to my mind) is *not* that no social distinctions between men and women existed in pre-colonial Yorubaland (they plainly did, in the division of labour as well as in symbols for social roles, for example), but that gender construction *as defined by the current category of analysis in the form employed by so many western historians* did not occur. Systems of distinction other than male/female were also important – at times more important than the male/female dyad – as primary symbol sets for articulating relations of superior and inferior power. Conversely, male/female distinctions did not always function invidiously towards women. What Oyewùmí is refusing is the claim of a western European category to universalism – in a sense, the right of European and north American scholars to define the ‘gender’ for African women’s history. For her, a society in which ‘gender’ was never constructed means a society in which perceptions of sexual difference are ‘not always enlisted as the basis for social classification’. In pre-colonial Yoruba culture, according to Oyewùmí, the *primary* principle of social classification was seniority, which, she emphasises, ‘was based on chronological age . . . [and] did not denote gender’.²⁵ This does not mean that Yoruba speakers were unaware of differences between male and female bodies, or that Yoruban culture did not embrace tropes of male and female bodies, or that pre-colonial Yoruba people lived in a golden age in which power was never deployed brutally and for purposes of domination and never articulated through seemingly natural systems of discourse. It means simply that perceptions and representations of sexual opposition were not presumptively a *primary* field for the articulation of *that* particular power. That is to say, she makes an important case that the category ‘gender’ as understood by western feminist historians on the basis of their own local histories cannot claim universal relevance.

Oyewùmí was not the first to raise this challenge. In an important article written just as Scott’s category was seizing the imaginations of western feminists, Ifi Amadiume criticised the ethnocentricity of early feminist anthropologists (and, by extension, feminist scholars generally) to whom ‘the universal social and cultural inferiority of women was a foregone conclusion’ as a result of their failure to recognise that ‘the domestic/public dichotomy which led them to th[is] conclusion . . . was a feature of their own particular class and culture’. In her own work on Igbo culture in eastern Nigeria, Amadiume did identify a gender system through which numerous mythic, social and culture distinctions were articulated according to a binary of masculine and feminine. But she also found that in this binary, the attributes associated with females did not necessarily lead to the economic or political subordination of the social group women, and that various social institutions, especially those of ‘male daughters’ and ‘female husbands’, permitted individual females officially to enter and enjoy the privileges of social positions gendered masculine.²⁶

In the early 1990s, Barry S. Hewlett made a similar argument, focusing on misunderstandings of the roles of males as a result of universalising western analytical categories. In his work among the central African Aka, Hewlett found father–infant relations that utterly defied the gender expectations of Western theory – fathers who ‘spend 47 per cent of their day holding or within an arm’s reach of their infants’, who

are gentle, soothing to their infants, and ‘more likely than [the] mother to hug and kiss the infant’.²⁷

More recently, Iranian historian Afsaneh Najmabadi returned to the subject of the ethnocentricity of gender as a category of historical analysis. Like Oyewùmí, Najmabadi worried about the ‘largely Anglo-American history of gender as a named category’ and about the implications of that history for the use of gender as a category of historical analysis ‘beyond the Americas and the modern’. She identified as a particular concern the persistence, in the seemingly neutral category, of a gender binary ‘derived from Western psycho-behavioural categories of gender-role determination’, noting her own struggle with the concept in writing what became *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*:

The project had begun as a project on the work of gender for the formation of Iranian modernity on iconic, narrative, metaphoric, and social levels. But there was another labor of gender that I had overlooked: the production of gender itself as a binary, man/woman – itself an effect of a paradigmatic shift in categories. . . from a view in which all genders were defined in relation to adult manhood to a view in which woman and man became opposite and complementary, to the exclusion of other categories that would not fit.

Her first ‘labor of gender’ was to break free of the modern, western category, and of the narrative implicit in that category, in order to tell another story (suppressed within the western model) of gender as it had existed and functioned in non-modern Iran. That task required acknowledging the ‘gender binary’ as a product of a particular historical moment, not as a universal category. It meant fundamentally ‘renegotiat[ing] meanings of gender and sexuality as well as their *analytic utility*’ outside of the epistemological confines of the west.²⁸

But the problems of employing an oppositionally binary concept of gender as a category of historical analysis are not confined to the study of non-western cultures and they are not resolved simply by acknowledging differences between those societies and an equally problematic category, ‘the west’ (or one of its variants). That route tends to reify the current largely Anglo-American category as the normative discourse of ‘gender’ (from which other cultures are deviations). Equally important, it conceals the contemporaneous variability and historical transformations of gender discourses *within* Europe and the United States, or, at best, subordinates those alternatives within a narrative that assumes the eventual triumph of the binary as we presume it to have existed in the late twentieth century. An overview of the scholarship on the history of women and gender in the United States illustrates the extent and costs of that approach.

The nineteenth century is a useful place to begin since it was here that the field of United States women’s history largely began, with classics like Carroll Smith Rosenberg’s ‘Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman’, Kathryn Kish Sklar’s *Catharine Beecher* and Nancy Cott’s *The Bonds of Womanhood*.²⁹ These scholars were drawn to antebellum America, at least in part, in search of the historical roots of the forms of oppression they identified in their own late twentieth-century world and the origins of ‘feminism’, the name given to resistance to that particular form of oppression. What they found was the ‘cult of domesticity’. As Nancy Cott observed in 1977, ‘The ideology of domesticity may seem to be contradicted functionally and abstractly by

feminism, but historically – as they emerged in the United States – the latter depended upon the former'.³⁰ There was nothing unusual about this connection between contemporary life and historical inquiry. Like all historians, early women's historians selected for study subjects that could be associated with matters of current interest. In this case, they focused on elements of social and intellectual life in the early American republic that seemed identifiable in terms of feminist concerns: questions of familial, political, legal and economic subordination of women as a group to men as a group and of the discursive conventions that articulated and justified that subordination. In the process, of course, they defined women's history as the history of subjects identifiable through the lens of the feminist critique, which assumed an oppositional binary of male/female as its primary trope.

This inclination to notice the past through the epistemology of late twentieth-century feminism – that is, to assign importance to evidence and events that could be understood as either oppressive or liberatory within the paradigm of the gender binary – continued to organise the field of women's history as historians reached forward to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and back into the revolutionary and then the colonial period. Until recently, scholarship on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been almost wholly preoccupied with the creation of the conditions that gave rise to late twentieth-century feminism and has pursued two strands in particular: the growing hegemony of the 'ideology of domesticity' even as women's educational opportunities and labour force participation and education expanded; and the responses of women to the constraints (and occasionally the possibilities) of that binary. Key themes included maternalism, reproductive control, aspects of suffrage movement, legal discrimination, sexism in the labour force and heterosexual family life (and the same-sex friendships that defied heterosexual domestic patterns). Understanding their work as 'part of a larger movement to reassess and redefine the position of women in the contemporary world', early American women's and gender historians showed a similar preoccupation with 'domesticity' – in this case, its origins and antecedents. Key themes here included 'patriarchal' household hierarchies, early gender divisions of labour and the exclusion of females from the franchise and public life.³¹ Indeed, by the late 1980s, 'separate spheres' had become such a pervasive analytical rubric for writing American women's history that some scholars began to voice concern. In an important essay on 'the rhetoric of women's history', Kerber acknowledged the framework's initial importance as 'a strategy that enabled historians to move the history of women out of the realm of the trivial and anecdotal and into the realm of analytical social history'. But she also cautioned women's historians that 'to continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships'.³²

Through the late 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of both Kerber's and Scott's interventions, historians of early American women broadened their attention from merely confirming the existence of the binary to examining the ways in which that structure was marshalled and deployed in specific changing discursive and social environments. The result was a literature that began to articulate the complex interactions of gender with other social formations and cultural discourses – most notably 'class', 'race' and region. These studies (which included, for example, Sarah Deutsch's *No Separate Refuge*, Peggy Pascoe's *Relations of Rescue* and Stephanie McCurry's *Masters of Small Worlds*) introduced a critical geographical and cultural breadth to the field and set a

new standard for historical specificity in the changing manifestations of gender in the history of the United States.³³ At the same time, they did not fundamentally question the character of the category of gender itself. Rather, they accepted the oppositional binary as the neutral categorical formation within which specific cultures might impose specific variations. Broadening the array of categories at play was an important revision that allowed for the investigation of more numerous social and cultural discourse variations, but doing this without questioning the categories themselves foreshortened the possibilities for recognising genuinely alternative formations. In terms of the history of women and gender, this enabled a narrative that was at once vastly more nuanced and complex and yet fundamentally unchanged. Manifestations of 'gender' altered over time and space, but 'gender' itself did not.

The very familiar history of the woman suffrage movement offers a striking double-layered case in point of the problems of imposing the separate spheres model on American women's history – double-layered because, as Lisa Tetrault points out, the model was first imposed by the suffragists and then sustained by feminist historians. In *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Susan B. Anthony, along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Gage, constructed a narrative of the movement as a struggle against 'separate spheres' – that is, against a gender binary so rigid and so privileging of men and penalising of women that it far superseded other societal inequities in its pervasiveness and harm. To a striking extent, women's historians of the United States have echoed that view in their own work, criticising women's rights advocates who allied with Republicans in supporting freedmen's rights as either naïve or treacherous and largely isolating the narrative of women's suffrage from the rest of post-Reconstruction United States.³⁴ Race scholars, most notably Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, have long objected to this approach as concealing the strategic and substantive importance of racial consciousness to the way white suffragists understood both their oppression and its redress.³⁵ In her recent work, Tetrault argues that this narrative also concealed a much more varied and less rigid gender system in the late nineteenth century, strategically exaggerating both the polarisation of the struggle and the breadth of the opposition. Women had long voted in municipal and some state elections. While many state and national legislators opposed expanding the female suffrage, many common people did not; active supporters and friendly listeners – including quite a few men – flocked to suffragists' lyceum lectures, which furnished some of the suffragists with both celebrity and a fairly nice income.³⁶ The binary may not have been either so fully invidious or so broadly entrenched as many of us have supposed.

Other turn-of-the-century studies raise similar possibilities, although they have stopped short of explicitly contesting the category. In her study of early twentieth-century female labour activism, Nan Enstad emphasised the importance of breaking up consolidated and rigid categories of identity. She argued instead for an analytical language of 'subjectivity': 'Subjectivity is . . . related to the concepts "self" and "identity", with a crucial distinction: subjectivity emphasizes a process of becoming that is never completed. It is based on the principle that who one is is neither essential nor fixed, but is continually shaped and reshaped in human social exchange'. As she demonstrated, the growth of popular culture at the turn of the century – exactly at the moment when the woman suffrage movement was reaching its broadest appeal – provided labouring young women with both material and social forms for rearticulating 'the female'. The representation of 'the lady' that so inspired labouring women, for example, was not a

mere pale and envy-riven reflection of 'the lady' of elite discourse: it was its own gender marker, signally a distinct gendering process. For the same period, George Chauncey identified a varied and complex array of sexualities among urban males, all of which hint at the existence of multiple understandings of gender – including, for example, the 'pansy', the 'Nance', the 'fairie' and the 'buttercup' as well as 'he-men' and 'she-men'. Even professional sexologists of the period analysed the genders into three sexualities: male, female and intermediate. This evidence of non-homonormativity, to use Lisa Duggan's term, points to an absence of clear heteronormativity in both practice and identity at the turn of the century – that is, to the absence of a controlling oppositional binary. Other works, such as Regina Kunzel's *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945*, have traced this more complex understanding of sexuality deeper into the twentieth century. Although some historians distinguish 'sexuality' from 'gender', identifying a gender binary as foundational and sexual varieties as epiphenomenal, work like Enstad's, Chauncey's and Kunzel's invite us to flip that framework – to take variation as the rule and to understand categories with 'normative' claims as but instances of the epiphenomena of that variation.³⁷

The implications of this shift are too numerous to discuss fully here, but one deserves especial note. Understanding the history of gender in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America as a far more complex discourse than the binary category recognises also allows us as historians to comprehend the 'feminist' politics of the late twentieth century far more broadly and complexly. As anyone who lived through that period knows, 'feminist' politics were never only about male and female. They were always also about race, about class, about sexuality, about age and region and religion and nationality. Moreover, 'feminism' was about these discourses constitutively, not merely additively. Perhaps abandoning a category of gender that privileges the oppositional male/female binary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will enable us to write a more nuanced and useful history of late twentieth-century feminism as a complexly consolidated historical moment. Perhaps we will even come to consider that the male/female binary was an epiphenomenon.

The failure to question the category 'gender' has also continued to shape the way we organise and understand *early* American history. Although a number of recent studies seem to suggest the existence of gender discourses that were not rigidly binary or oppositional, women's and gender historians seldom take up those possibilities in a serious way, viewing them instead as preludes to the coming of the binary or as proto-binaries themselves.

Reflecting the analytical dominance of the category, most studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century settler women frame those women's lives in terms of their roles as wives and mothers (in contrast to a man's roles as husband and father) on the assumption that all other arenas of their lives were subsumed to these two. To be sure, 'wife' was a clearly marked legal status with important meanings and implications for colonial white women, but the accumulating studies of settler women suggest far more complex social/economic identities – including those of head of household, family governor, supervisor of servants and slave-owner, agriculturalist, manufacturer and trader, not to mention sometimes business-owner, lawyer, councillor, author and

scientist.³⁸ Although some women's historians acknowledge that the role of deputy husband 'reinforced a certain elasticity in pre-modern notions of gender', most still subordinate these roles under those of 'wife' and 'mother' contained within a 'domestic' arena.³⁹ If 'domestic' means 'household' (a term I prefer as freer of the discourse of gender spheres), then such a description is probably accurate. But if those 'domestic' boundaries are to include all of a given women's daily possibilities, then they must be drawn so generously as to be virtually meaningless analytically. Mary Beth Norton has suggested that, to make sense of this, we may need to question the assumption that gender was always primary in colonial women's lives. She argues that the role of the 'deputy husband' – or 'fictive widow' – points to the potential primacy of status, not gender, as a discourse of power in the seventeenth century. Especially in elite families, Norton argued, a wife might act aggressively to protect her husband's interests as she saw them, even when he saw them differently. Most records of this practice suggest that a woman might pay dearly for such independence, but such documents – the trials of Ann Hibbens, Anne Eaton and others – condemn the egregiousness of particular cases rather than the practice itself.⁴⁰

A number of recent works have, like Norton's, discovered important variations in the historical meaning of gender – indeed, have concluded that the imposition of a particular category of 'gender' was integral to the process of colonisation. Unlike Norton's analysis, however, most of these have backed away from questioning the category 'gender', instead subordinating those exceptions to an overall trajectory of the coming of the 'modern' trope; they become, literally, exceptions that prove the historical norm of the emerging oppositional binary, rather than possible signs of historically discrete alternatives to that binary. Studies in virtually every area of social and cultural life – law, politics, family life, the economy, religion – have found striking and consistent transgressions of the presumed all-encompassing male/female binary in settler culture.⁴¹

Some of the most exciting work has been in the relatively new area of early American sexuality, where the concept of the relentlessly oppositional binary among European immigrants is beginning to receive concerted critical attention. At least since Edmund Morgan put the lie to the stereotype of Puritan sexual prudery, early American historians have documented the robust and varied sexual lives (and fantasies) of the Europeans who came to the Americas.⁴² And what a lot of them there were! Men with vaginas, women with Devil's teats, cross-dressers, sodomites, passionate same-sex lovers, devotees of bestiality, child-sex, sadomasochism and, perhaps least common, celibates.⁴³ Until recently, historians of American sexuality have tended either to discount the rather extravagant sexual practices of the colonists as exotic exceptions or to treat them as discrete acts that did not really measure up to an interiorised 'sexuality' at all and certainly did not challenge the rigid binary that held 'gender' in its iron grip. Even in more recent work, this proliferation of practices is generally marshalled to underscore the later constriction of sexual/gender discourse rather than to point to the historical discreteness of particular formations.

In her study of sexuality in revolutionary-era Philadelphia, for example, Clare Lyons suggested that 'serial non-marital monogamy, self-divorce, and boisterous, bawdy, and public heterosocial sex play' as well as interracial sexual relationships constituted continuous identities, acknowledged by both the individuals and the communities within which they lived. This seems very much an argument for a historically

discrete polymorphous discourse of gender, later replaced by a binary one – and Lyons made this claim in her introduction:

Before the eighteenth century gender... was one among many ordained and fixed hierarchical relationships that ordered society... The Enlightenment undermined the belief in such natural hierarchies and upset the basis for woman's subordination to man. A new conceptual framework would be necessary if the gender hierarchy was to be maintained. The response, developed over the eighteenth century, was to reconceptualize gender by positing radical differences between men and women and fixing them in the anatomical body. The creation of binary opposite gendered sexualities was at the core of this new gender system.⁴⁴

As promising as this analysis is, however, it actually does little to dislodge the binary as a transhistorical formation. The seemingly polymorphous early sexualities are in fact all constituted through the male/female oppositional binary. The new sexual regime only narrows and disciplines their expression as an aspect of 'domesticity'.⁴⁵

A related assumption of the colonial primacy of the twentieth-century Anglo-European category played through Kathleen Brown's path-breaking study of the double helix of race and gender in the historical construction of slavery in *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*. The book began with a relatively open-ended definition of gender simply as 'historically specific discourses, social roles, and identities defining sexual difference and frequently deployed for the purposes of social and political order'. Analytically, Brown left those roles, identities, relationships and purposes unspecified, not presuming (at least, not theorising) that gender would function the same way in different societies. On the contrary, she was at pains to situate the settlers' concept of gender historically in early modern England and to underscore its instability there. 'Contact', she argued, was, among other dynamics, a 'gender frontier' – a struggle articulated through distinct systems of representations associated with male and female bodies. Nevertheless, the study focused on the colonists and the concept of gender they would eventually fashion through contact – a concept that moved relentlessly towards the male/female binary and early forms of southern 'domesticity'. Perhaps as a result, Euro-American perspectives (from the early modern period but also from the late twentieth century) seemed to spill over into assumptions about other cultures: Brown's characterisation of the Powhatan Indian confederacy as 'patriarchal' seemed oddly Eurocentric and she paid little attention to the existence or resilience of discrete system(s) of gender carried to the Americas by enslaved Africans.

African American women and gender historians have long deplored the tendency of the field to understand gender largely in Anglo-European terms. As early as 1971, Joyce Ladner argued that white feminists were ignoring the particularity of African American women's history. She focused particularly on ways in which west African cultures articulated concepts of gender quite different from the concepts that characterised early modern England – distinctions between males and females that did not necessarily constitute a subordination either of *female persons* or of all things symbolically 'feminised'.⁴⁶ This situation has in some ways improved over the intervening forty years, especially with the publication of Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women*, which begins the project of integrating west African gender systems into the history of enslaved African women in America.⁴⁷ As Stephanie Camp observed in a celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman*, the idea of 'the entangled nature of race and gender in US history... is a commonplace one now'. But as Camp immediately noted, 'we still have a great deal to

learn about how exactly that entanglement played out on the ground'.⁴⁸ Perhaps the discrepancy arises from the limitations of our category. Perhaps the 'entanglement . . . on the ground', messy and changing and offering up a variety of understandings of both race and gender, simply defies the singular category through which we insist on trying to analyse it. The work of such prominent scholars as Deborah Gray White, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Elsa Barkley Brown and Martha Jones, to name only a few, describe African American communities in which discourses of gender are certainly in extremely complex historical conversation with the discourses of bourgeois white society and yet remain significantly distinct from those discourses.⁴⁹ These are not mere minority variants of a normative (white bourgeois) category. They – like the categories judged normative – are evidence of the multiple and variable meanings of gender that emerge as indicators of historically specific political and cultural moments.

Like recent work in African American history, recent work in Native American history offers some promising new approaches to gender. Most early studies of Native American women, for example, were implicitly or explicitly organised according to an Anglo-European model of gender. These studies set out to assess the relative power of males and females in Native cultures (often with a view to criticising the treatment of women in Euro-American societies). Most of the work focused on the gender division of labour (Was women's work important? Did women control their own work? Did their work bring them prestige and power within the community?) and/or on the gender division of authority in community decision-making (Did women speak in council? Did women have ways of vetoing council decisions? Were women ever principal chiefs?). Related to these studies were two other streams of inquiry. One examined the roles of women as cultural mediators in early European–Native contacts. The other focused on cases where the Anglo-European category appeared to be challenged in what some scholars referred to as 'third' and 'fourth' genders: apparently male-sex persons who performed 'female' social and economic roles, or female-sexed persons who performed 'male' social and economic roles. Whatever their particular concerns, however, virtually all of these studies assumed in indigenous societies a stable sexual opposition functioning independently as a primary signifier of power – a system of gender, in other words, modelled closely on the presumed European system.⁵⁰

Applying a twentieth-century category of gender certainly produced something recognisable to *western* eyes, but probably not much that pre-contact Native Americans would have found familiar.⁵¹ Newer work in the field has begun to modify both the categorical assumptions and the findings of the first studies, with particular attention to the character and status of the sexual binary. In the process, these works have discovered the ways in which the analytical assumption of gender as an oppositional binary replicates the original European colonial discourse of indigenous gender.⁵² As Nancy Shoemaker points out, a male/female binary certainly existed in Native American cultures, but it was not more salient than a host of other binaries, including war/peace, young/old, plant/animal and many others, and probably was not separable from them. Under some circumstances, these lined up in ways reminiscent of the modern European model – for example, 'peace' and 'female' tended to have a close 'conceptual association'. In fact, however, the field of signification they created was quite different from that predicted by the European model. For example, Cherokees described the town of Chota as a 'mother' town of 'peace' and 'refuge' – a cluster of traits that would immediately signal female domesticity and seclusion from political engagement in the

modern European discourse. For the Cherokees, these qualities described 'the capital center of Cherokee politics in the mid-18th century'.⁵³

This disruption of the western binary also disrupts accompanying assumptions about the kind of power signified through gender. Not signalling female inferiority, the cluster 'female/peace/refuge' also did not stably associate femaleness and vulnerability or powerlessness. The principal leaders who sat in council at Chota were males, the people they listened to were both males and females, old and young, and the power they held arose from their ability to demonstrate obedience to and respect for those people, not to dominate them. Perhaps this way of understanding gender in native cultures can move us toward a deeper understanding of 'two-spirited' people. Rather than anomalies to be somehow forced into an oppositional model by a rather mechanical reversal, we might want to consider figures of men/women and women/men as indications of the fluidity of the sexual binary – in its constant interplay with other binaries – as a signifier in Native cultures. That is to say, a 'young/active/female/war' cluster might not signify a gender-denominated category (in contrast to a 'young/active/male/war' cluster),⁵⁴ but might instead mark a different sort of category in which *gender is subordinate* – a warrior whose powers transcend the body, for example, or whose power is made the more terrifying by the mingling of menstrual blood and the blood of battle.

Gunlög Fur makes a related argument in an essay that is at least in part directed towards historians of native America who reject gender in any form as a useful category for analysing Native American history. Indeed, Fur retains many of the assertions about gender contained in current understandings of gender as a category of analysis. But with a critical distinction: she argues that maleness and femaleness worked very differently as fields of representation in Native than in European cultures. She encourages us to look for salient bodied categories other than 'male' and 'female' in Native societies, to examine closely Native understandings of the relationships between corporeal bodies and the spirit world and to be cautious about reading the apparent absence of females from accounts as a statement about status or instrumentality.⁵⁵ For Native cultures, 'shape-shifting' – the ongoing and fluid mingling of categories – may prove a far more useful metaphor of gender than the narrower and more rigid location on a binary; a concept of power that embraces consensus, obedience, deference, silence and even invisibility may prove more useful than one limited to dominion and control.

These works, then, would seem to illuminate very different ways of defining gender – from social relations in which a male/female binary may be present and important, but not necessarily primary, to a system of gender in which multiple other axes of identity frequently modify and sometimes entirely overwhelm the binary and in which the binary, even when present, cannot be reduced to oppositionally sexed bodies. Clearly *some* sort of category of gender was present in pre- and early contact Native American cultures, but equally clearly it was not the category that so dominates current gender and women's history.

That did not make gender less significant. Among the most path-breaking insights to arise from new work on Native American history is the importance of indigenous concepts of gender in structuring and controlling early contacts with Europeans. In some respects echoing earlier studies of Native women as cultural mediators, this work is a part of the more recent emphasis on a 'middle ground' of power between Native and European cultures, with attention to the role of gender.⁵⁶ Juliana Barr, for example, argues that Native communities in the south-west borderlands were able to compel

early Spanish arrivals to accept their kinship systems as principles of contact and trade.⁵⁷

The work of beginning to theorise earlier and different models of gender requires a careful attention to historical process and to the specificity of cultural systems. However much it had in common with Britain and France, the United States was constituted from colonies. And not just any type of colonies, but *settler* colonies. Both the French in France and the British in Britain struggled with the implications of their own slave holding, but the home nations did not intermingle extensively sexually or culturally with the people they considered 'primitive'. The French in France and the Britons in Britain could with some plausibility claim that their bodies – and their cultures – were 'pure', at least in terms of African and indigenous American heritage.⁵⁸ Not so for white American settlers. They made their homes in a world recognised as 'savage' by their parent cultures and they imported hundreds of thousands of additional 'savages' to be their slaves. They traded, played, cohabited and bore children with both Native Americans and African people (even as they inflicted long regimes of brutality on both groups) and their cultures were shaped by those contacts. As the careful (if contradictory) legislating on slave descent suggests, the official delineation of cultures through bodies was of critical practical as well as symbolic importance to white Americans precisely because both their cultures and their bodies were no longer distinct from those of Native and African Americans.

This was the stuff of very complex self-fashioning, drenched in haughtiness and denial. For white Americans, the embrace of a modern trope of gender was part of a historically situated discourse that allowed them to divide the world into natural oppositions that bolstered their own brutal domination even as it redeemed them as the fulfilment of an idealised civilisation.⁵⁹ Herein may lie the answer to Lyons's question and the explanation for why the American Revolution and the founding of the republic appear to loom so large in the history of gender and sexuality in America. Much more than political independence from Britain was at stake in this act of national invention. The attempted construction of the authoritative state may have required a ritual (if not in fact effective) expunging of the assortment of gender discourses and sexualities that characterised the British North American colonies by the late eighteenth century as one of the technologies for articulating the national body and securing the hierarchies of individual bodies within the nation.

But these, or other, conclusions can become available to us only as we begin to theorise gender in early America on its own terms, and not simply as a less developed variant of a late twentieth-century American model. Of course, trying to identify a historically-grounded understanding of the meaning of relationships between the male and the female for early America will carry with it exactly the same potential snares as the use of a concept grounded in a later (and different) culture: the structural concealments, the tendency towards oversimplification and generalisation, the temptation to flatten anomalies among cultures for the sake of theoretical clarity. In addition, theorising an early modern process of gendering will require us to avoid the seductions of teleology – of assuming we know where we are going. We will need to recognise varieties of relationships that fell away entirely in the transition to the nineteenth century, as well as those that became reconfigured and/or that re-emerged in new combinations.

The 'exceptions' accumulate like the epicycles of the Ptolemaic universe, until one must ask whether we, like Ptolemy, do not need to change the framework of our

assumptions. In searching the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for roots of the nineteenth-century 'ideology of gender spheres', perhaps we have missed and/or undervalued the distinctiveness of the earlier period. Perhaps we have failed to appreciate a different structuring of the societal and discursive relationship of male and female, more diverse and more fluid, less primary as a performed organisation of power and authority. Perhaps rather than aberrations to a fixed 'gender' core, this diversity was constitutive of normative adult womanhood.

So let me return to Barbara Jeanne Fields, with a modest reframing of her critique. Fields complained that categories take on lives of their own. They do not really, of course; they take on the lives we give them. If the category 'gender' has supplanted the historical subjects of our work, and so narrowed and (pre)determined our findings, it is because we have let it. I want to suggest that we quit letting it.

Accomplishing that goal is harder than setting it. Especially in light of 'the largely Anglo-American history of gender as a named category', should we abandon both the category and the concept altogether?⁶⁰ Is it possible to prise any part of the concept loose for use in broader and culturally less biased ways? Can we use the term gender at all, at this point, without implying its predilection for an invidious oppositional binary?

On the other hand, have we exhausted the usefulness of asking what sorts of representational systems associated with 'male' and 'female' (if any) exist in a given time and place and the character and operation of those processes if they do exist? I am not convinced that we have. In large part because we have been so blinded by the rigidity of our category, we have yet to develop very nuanced ways to talk about systems that might include the male and the female but *not* in a fixed binary, or *not* in a primary way, or *not* in a differential relation of power. I think such a language is still analytically useful.

But we need to make certain that such an analytical language does not by definition privilege one historical manifestation of gender and thereby implicitly exclude other formations from the conversation. We need to do this, not only because such an exclusive framework leads inevitably towards ahistoricism but also because it implicitly marks any other processes of meaning as *not gender*. Formally or implicitly dividing our studies into the 'gendered' and the 'non-gendered' not only reduces our work once again to a binary, but announces the western concept of gender as the critical heart of our studies, in much the way that 'postcolonial studies' risks keeping western colonialism at the centre of the conversation.⁶¹

Nor am I inclined to believe that the answer to this particular problem lies in simply shifting from one all-encompassing paradigm to another – for example, from 'gender' to 'sexuality' – without confronting the problems within our current category. Terminology is important, but equally important is our willingness, *in a given historical study*, to interrogate that terminology, to ask why we are using a particular critical construct, what it means to us, from whose experience it derives and what it highlights and what it conceals in our work as historians. We need to problematise the way in which the category (any category) has been historically constructed. In the absence of that critical deliberateness – which often occurs in only the most perfunctory way in historical studies of women/gender, especially as practised in the United States and Europe – a new terminology would carry the same old limitations.

I think the first step towards achieving such deliberateness is to disinvest ourselves and our field from the claim that gender is a *category of analysis* at all, a claim originally made largely as a political statement about the importance of the field. In my view, this claim not only is *not* essential to our project, but actually hinders that work. What I am suggesting here is that we must decide just what history we want to write: the history of a particular definition of gender, treated as if it were abstract and universal, or the historically grounded histories of particular processes of gendering, resulting in distinct cultural meanings with distinct social and cultural formations – gender, that is to say, as cultural process, various and altering over time (even within the modern period and even within western culture).

Understanding that gender is not a single, named process should also enable us to examine more carefully the extent to which and the ways in which gender is a language about power in a given society. In the modern era in western European and North American culture, power has become the language through which we name the creation and maintenance of inequalities, a practice that has impoverished our capacity to name or investigate other forms of human agency, passionate connection and control.

But understanding that gender is not a fixed analytical category is only the first step. It frees us to imagine a sparer and therefore roomier concept of ‘gender’ – one that captures the essential elements of interest to us without predicating their relationships and meanings – but it does not automatically do the imagining for us. That is the work of our work – our ‘labor of gender’, to use Najmabadi’s expression. That labour requires that we convert gender from a prescription to a series of questions about process, the first of which are: *were* male and female important social/cultural markers for the subjects for our work (individuals, communities or events) and, if so, how were they structured, what valences did they carry and how important were they?

Dispensing with the overarching category might encourage us to set aside the historically unproductive insistence on the primary-ness of gender and focus instead on the complex fabric of processes and meanings that constitute a social or cultural history. We know that ‘gender’ never exists as a self-sufficient or self-realising category. In the abstract, at least, we know that there is no social subject whose experience is solely constructed through the processes of gender (however we define gender) or whose continuing *sole* identity (experienced or attributed) is gendered. Although the complexity of social processes is seldom the main point of historical gender studies, in fact virtually all of the work on gender to date demonstrates that even an identity as male or female is in constant and inseparable interplay with other processes of status and identity.⁶² The tedious ever-presence of the triad ‘race, class and gender’ in article and book titles and in course descriptions testifies at least to the field’s awareness of the analytical limitations of distinct categories (even if its also reflects our inability to transcend these categories very fully).

I suggest that the primaryness of gender in a given situation should be one of our questions, rather than one of our assumptions. In one moment or one era or one social setting, gender may seem to rise to primacy as an expression of social position and positioning, but it is always gender as nested in, mingled with and inseparable from the cluster of other factors socially relevant in a given culture. It is never ‘gender’ alone. Deploying gender as a category of analysis disguises this process of reciprocal constitution and implies for gender an independent quasi-scientific causal status. I am reminded of Scott’s observation on ‘history’s disciplinary sense of the

complexity of social causation'. 'Instead of a search for single origins, we have to conceive of processes so interconnected that they cannot be disentangled... In anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo's formulation, we must pursue not universal, general causality but meaningful explanation'.⁶³ Gender is one set of historical relationships nested within a larger historical cluster of relationships from which it cannot, finally, be meaningfully disentangled.

This was the point of Elsa Barkley Brown's wonderful 1992 essay, 'What Has Happened Here', in which she criticised white feminists' alarm at the efforts of black feminists to emphasise the important racial differences in their experience of gender, comparing that fear of diversity to the classical musician's insistence on perfect order and control in the concert hall. In place of that classic politic, which Brown characterised as linear and silencing, she recommended the aesthetic of jazz – 'nonlinear ways of thinking about the world, of hearing multiple rhythms and thinking music not chaos, ways that challenge the notion that sufficient attention to diversity leads to intellectual chaos, to political vacuum, or to intellectual and political void'.⁶⁴ Brown was arguing here, specifically, for a way of conceptualising gender that could recognise its contingency and multiplicity: 'Unfortunately', she reflected, 'it seems to me, few historians are good jazz musicians; most of us write as if our training were in classic music. We require surrounding silence – or the audience, of all the instruments not singled out as the performers in this section, even often of any alternative visions of the composer's. That then makes it particularly problematic for historians when faced with trying to understand difference while holding on to an old score that has in many ways assumed that despite race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other differences, at core all women do have the same gender'.⁶⁵ This was a political and an analytical position that Brown rejected: 'we have still to recognize that being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman... We still have to recognize that all women do not have the same gender'.⁶⁶

As we relinquish the assumption that gender is necessarily primary, it seems to me that we must also abandon our expectation that it will always be binary, a formulation that relies upon the assumption that gender is something we can analyse in and of itself, as an analytical discrete category. Rather than assuming the binary, I suggest we let it emerge from our investigation, if it is present. One strategy here would be to follow the lead of anthropologists and ethnographers who have reframed the concept to permit the identification of 'third', 'fourth', 'fifth' genders, and so on, recognising a 'man/woman' gender or a 'woman/man' gender. Since this approach does not necessarily (or even usually) tie additional genders to reproductive body types (for example, the research on the institution of 'berdache' among Native Americans assumes male and female reproductive bodies), it does offer an opportunity to loosen the association with bodies that haunts the concept 'gender'.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the supplementary genders are generally intermediate combinations of the cultural male/female binary. Their addition makes that binary more complicated and less fixed, but does not fundamentally dislodge it.

To my mind, a more satisfactory approach to transcending the tyranny of categorical binaries emerges in recent theories of 'genderqueer-ness', a concept meant to convey a rejection of gender *categorisation* altogether. As the activist group FORGE puts it:

There are different modes of being genderqueer, and it is an evolving concept. Some believe they are a little of both or feel they have no gender at all. Others believe that gender is a social construct, and choose not to adhere to that construct. Some genderqueers do fit into the stereotypical gender roles expected of their sex, but still reject gender as a social construct. Still other people identify as genderqueer since, though they are cisgendered [a neologism meaning 'not transgender'], they do not fit many of society's expectations for the gender in which they identify.⁶⁸

The concept of genderqueer-ness introduces such potential variety of cultural expressions and identities as to pull hard at the tendency to reduce 'gender' to bodies and invites historians to emphasise gender as a process productive of multiple expressions sometimes associated with male and female bodies but without *necessary or presumptive* reference to those bodies for intelligibility.

For historians, the concept suggests a framework for not anticipating an association of, for example, 'strength' with 'male' or 'masculinity', or tenderness with 'female' or 'femininity' without evidence that these were the ways the specific culture under investigation understood those traits. Such a formulation permits us to recognise a boisterous, compliant, fashion-conscious bully as a gender formation without shoe-horning the subject into a 'female masculine' or 'male effeminate' category – a fluidity that would surely aid us in identifying and discussing earlier and non-western gender processes and formations historically. This would not prevent historians from identifying binary gender formations where they have historically occurred, but it would give us a tool for seeing other gender formations where they have historically occurred. It would encourage us to ask first *whether* a male/female distinction is important in social relationships in this place and this time. If it seems to be, then let us ask in what ways and with what recurrence and as parts of what other processes that distinction becomes important. Perhaps most important, until we can demonstrate connections and interactions, let us ask these questions very locally, and let us try to derive our answers from and about the people and societies we want to investigate.

I suspect these shifts in perspective and practice would have several immediate and ameliorative effects. In the first place, it would force us to explain what we mean when we use the term 'gender' – the term that we claim animates the structures of power globally, but which we seem to find either too dull or too self-evident to warrant much discussion. We would require ourselves to ground the concept, as we were defining it, in place and time. Of course that would make us better historians. It might make us poorer intellectual imperialists and force us, as Dipesh Chakrabarty might put it, to provincialise gender as a category of analysis.⁶⁹

Treating gender as a question of analysis would also encourage us to regard our sources more critically and more creatively – and more respectfully. When the framework of our findings is a foregone conclusion, the sources themselves become of minor importance, useful only for our ability to cull them for what we have already decided is present. That changes the moment we begin truly to interrogate both our category and our sources – to ask what we are seeing. Let us at least have to demonstrate, first to ourselves and then to our readers, that ours is in fact the most persuasive reading of the evidence.

In this process we may perhaps begin to square off against our strongest enemy – and I suspect our best ally: ourselves. We need to become sharply more conscious of the historian as a figured self and our field as a figured field. I agree with Elsa Barkley Brown that feminist historians have been loath to take that step, at least publicly, for

fear of weakening the authority of our own truth claims. We seem to believe that, if we allow for variation in the historical relations of maleness and femaleness, we lose legitimacy to judge or intervene where those relations are vehicles of domination and subordination in the present. And so far, we seem to have accorded that anxiety higher priority than the fear that, for many societies – for many women – we might be getting it wrong historically . . . which means, of course, that we may also be getting it wrong in the present. I join Brown, then, in calling for a gender history that not only allows, in Brown's musical terms, 'riffing', but also recognises the process of riffing as the very heart of the field.

Notes

In addition to the other contributors to, and the editors of, this issue and the outside reviewers, I am grateful to the following colleagues for taking the time to give me close critical feedback on various earlier incarnations of this essay: Kathleen Brown, Nancy Cott, Lori Ginzberg, Richard Godbeer, Pernille Ipsen, Mary Kelley, Joy Newmann, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, and the members of the Gender and Woman's History Workshop at the University of Wisconsin.

1. Barbara Jeanne Fields, 'Categories of Analysis? Not in My Book', in *Viewpoints: Excerpts from the ACLS Conference on the Humanities in the 1990s*, American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Papers Series 10 (New York: ACLS, 1989), pp. 29–34.
2. I do think that historians of manhood tend to naturalise masculinity, but in much the same way that historians of women tend to naturalise womanhood.
3. 'Only by means of a break with the theoretical vision, which is experienced as a break with ordinary vision, can the observer take account, in his description of ritual practice, of the fact of participation (and consequently of his own separation from this)': Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 36. See also Sandra Harding, 'The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Thought', in Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl and Mary Wyer (eds), *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 15–34, here p. 20; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), esp. pp. 8–9.
4. Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), pp. 1,056–61; Joan Wallach Scott, 'Some More Reflections on Gender and Politics', in Joan Wallach Scott *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988; rev. edn, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 199–206; Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004), pp. 20–54.
5. See e.g., the classic women's history anthologies: Mary S. Hartman and Lois W. Banner (eds), *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Berenice A. Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976). The term 'gender' is not used in the introduction to either collection and appears rarely in the essays.
6. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157–210, here p. 165.
7. Classic work in this vein includes Joan Kelly, 'The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory: A Postscript to the "Women and Power" Conference', *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979), pp. 216–27; Zillah R. Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Annette Kühn and AnnMarie Wolpe (eds), *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).
8. This work began with the advent of feminism, but the 1980s saw the publication of a host of now-classic pieces, including Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1982); bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Filomena Chioma Steady (ed.), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1981); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Patricia Hill Collins, 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought', *Signs* 14 (1989), pp. 745–73.

9. On standpoint theory, see Dorothy E. Smith, 'A Sociology of Women', in Julia Sherman and Evelyn Beck (eds), *The Prism of Sex* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) and the later retrospective evaluations of standpoint theory in *Signs* 22 (1997).
10. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,055.
11. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', pp. 1,053, 1,055.
12. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', pp. 1,058–9.
13. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', pp. 1,060–61.
14. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,064.
15. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,055.
16. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,064.
17. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,067.
18. The claim to universality was in fact fairly explicitly made: passing lightly over the possibilities that her own definition of gender might be historically and culturally specific, Scott asserted the 'persistent and recurrent' primacy of gender 'in Judeo-Christian as well as Islamic traditions' – a formulation that flattened both variety and change over time in both 'traditions'. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,069.
19. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,067.
20. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,069, referring to Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.
21. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', pp. 1,067–9.
22. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category', p. 1,069.
23. Scott, 'Some More Reflections', pp. 201, 208. See also Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Joan Wallach Scott, 'Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity', *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), pp. 284–304; Joan Wallach Scott, *Parité!: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
24. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, 'Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects', in Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (ed.), *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 11. See also Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Bibi Bakare-Yusef, Edward Waswa Kisiang'ani, Desiree Lewis, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí and Filomena Chioma Steady, *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
25. Oyewùmí, 'Visualizing the Body', p. 13.
26. Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 31–47.
27. Barry S. Hewlett, *Intimate Fathers: The Nature and Context of Aka Pygmy Paternal Infant Care* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 168. I am grateful to Hannah Nyala West for bringing this study to my attention.
28. Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Historical Analysis?', *Journal of Women's History* 18 (2006), pp. 11–21, esp. pp. 11, 14; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
29. Carroll Smith Rosenberg, 'Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America', *American Quarterly* 23 (1971), pp. 562–84; Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).
30. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), here p. 9.
31. See e.g., Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Knopf, 1982), here p. 240.
32. Linda K. Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History', *Journal of American History* 75 (1988), pp. 9–39, here p. 38.
33. Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

34. See e.g., Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).
35. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).
36. Lisa Marguerite Tetrault, 'The Memory of a Movement: Woman Suffrage and Reconstruction America, 1865–1890' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wisconsin, 2004).
37. Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), esp. pp. 1–29; Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 50; Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
38. I am indebted for some of these examples to my co-presenters and to the audience of 'Historicizing Gender: A Roundtable', Organization of American Historians Annual Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 31 March 2007. The full panel included: Richard Godbeer, 'Gender and Culture: A Multilayered Approach'; Kate Haulman, 'Bodies and Minds in Early America'; Jeanne Boydston, 'Questioning Gender' and Rodney Hessinger, 'Bringing it All Back Home: Masculinity, Femininity, and the Reintegration of Early American Gender'. See, for examples of work on these various aspects of colonial womanhood: Ulrich, *Good Wives*; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Cornelia Hughes Dayton, 'Turning Points and the Relevance of Colonial Legal History', *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 50 (1993), pp. 7–17; Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women before the Bar: Gender, Law and Society in Connecticut, 1639–1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Sarah E. Fatherly, *Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, forthcoming 2008); Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
39. Ulrich, *Good Wives*, p. 50.
40. Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1996), esp. pp. 140–80. See also, Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*.
41. See e.g., Dayton, 'Turning Points'; Kierner, *Beyond the Household*; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Random House, 1997); Ruth H. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Boydston, *Home and Work*.
42. Edmund S. Morgan, 'The Puritans and Sex', *New England Quarterly* 15 (1942), pp. 591–607.
43. For discussions of sexuality in Anglo culture in early American history see e.g., Merril D. Smith (ed.), *Sex and Sexuality in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also the forum on sexuality in *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 60 (2003), esp. the very interesting comments by Anne G. Myles, 'Queering the Study of Early American Sexuality', pp. 199–202.
44. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble*, here p. 3. Richard Godbeer, "'The Cry of Sodom': Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England', *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 52 (1995), pp. 259–86.
45. Work in European history suggests a similar transition during this same period. See e.g., Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
46. Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1971). See also the excerpt from this work included in Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women's History*, pp. 179–93; Carroll with Hartman and Banner (eds), *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, which included no essays on women of colour; Gerda Lerner's

- important anthology, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
47. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), esp. chapter 2, pp. 50–68. See also Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) for a broader framework for beginning to recognise this diversity and its implications for African American history. An important cluster of diasporic studies have identified distinct African concepts of gender and sexuality carried to the Caribbean and Latin America: e.g., Oyewùmí (ed.), *African Gender Studies*; Andrea Cornwall (ed.), *Readings in Gender in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Signe Arnfeld (ed.), *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the Afro-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and the Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Michele Mitchell, Sandra Gunning and Tera W. Hunter (eds), *Dialogues of Dispersal: Gender, Sexuality, and African Diasporas* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).
 48. Stephanie M.H. Camp, 'Ar' n' t I a Woman? in the Vanguard of the History of Race and Sex in the United States', *Journal of Women's History* 19 (2007), pp. 146–50, here p. 146.
 49. Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: Norton, 1998); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 'African-American Women's History and the Meta-language of Race', *Signs* 17 (1992), pp. 251–74; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Elsa Barkley Brown, 'To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865–1880', in Ann D. Gordon with Bettye Collier-Thomas (eds), *African American Women and the Vote 1837–1965* (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp. 66–99; Elsa Barkley Brown, 'Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African-American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom', *Public Culture* 7 (1994): pp. 107–46; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
 50. See e.g., Judith E. Brown, 'Economic Organization and the Position of Women Among the Iroquois', *Ethnohistory* 17 (1970), pp. 151–67; Jacqueline Peterson, 'Women Dreaming: The Religio-Psychology of Indian-White Marriage in the Western Great Lakes Fur Trade', in Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz and Janice Monk (eds), *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), pp. 49–79; Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Susan Sleeper-Smith, 'Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade', *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000), pp. 423–52; Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998); Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, tr. John L. Vantine (1990; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). An intermediate scholarship in the 1990s continued to examine Native women as a distinct group, but emphasised that gender among Native Americans was more flexible than among Europeans and that maleness and femaleness did not necessarily signify superiority and subjection: e.g., Karen Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
 51. I am obviously indebted to Chandra Talhade Mohanty for this phrasing: 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), pp. 61–88.
 52. In addition to the works cited below, it is important to note the path-breaking contribution of Ramon Gutierrez's *When Jesus Came the Corn Mother Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) as one of the first books to analyse closely the importance of discourses of sexuality as a technology of Spanish colonisation.
 53. Nancy Shoemaker, 'Categories', in Nancy Shoemaker (ed.), *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 51–74, here p. 59. See also Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. chapter 5, pp. 105–24.
 54. Italics added.
 55. Gunlög Fur, "'Some Women are Wiser than Some Men": Gender and Native American History', in Shoemaker (ed.), *Clearing a Path*, pp. 75–106.

56. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
57. Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
58. For recent work on anxieties of racial purity in France and Britain, see Guillaume Aubert, “‘The Blood of France’: Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World”, *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 61 (2004), pp. 439–78; Gordon M. Sayre, *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 248–304; Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 92–128; Deborah Wyrick, ‘The Madwoman in the Hut: Scandals of Hybrid Domesticity in Early Victorian Literature from the West Indies’, *Pacific Coast Philology* 33 (1998), pp. 44–57. See also Jennifer Spear’s important work on the use of the law to bolster sexual binaries in French Louisiana: Jennifer M. Spear, ‘Colonial Intimacies: Legislating Sex in French Louisiana’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 60 (2003), pp. 75–98.
59. See e.g., Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of an American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999); Fischer, *Suspect Relations*; Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches*; Morgan, *Laboring Women*.
60. Najmabadi, ‘Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories?’, p. 11.
61. Although I am not ready to abandon the language of gender, I recognise that forty years into the life of the field, any retention of that language may hint at this kind of privileging of the west.
62. For a very useful overview of theories of intersectionality, see Leslie McCall, ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’, *Signs* 30 (2005), pp. 1,771–1,800.
63. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category’, pp. 1,055, 1,067.
64. Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics”, *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992), pp. 295–312, here pp. 296–7.
65. Brown, ‘What Has Happened Here’, p. 298.
66. Brown, ‘What Has Happened Here’, p. 300.
67. See e.g., Roscoe, *Changing Ones*; Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*.
68. FORGE (For Ourselves Reworking Gender Expression) website, <<http://www.forge-forward.org/index.php>>, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. See also Joan Nestle, Clare Howell and Riki Wilchins (eds), *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary* (New York: Alyson Books, 2002).
69. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).