GENDER HISTORY ACROSS EPISTEMOLOGIES

Edited by DONNA R. GABACCIA and MARY JO MAYNES

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2013
Originally published as Volume 24, Issue 3 of *Gender & History*

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gender history across epistemologies / edited by Donna R. Gabaccia and Mary Jo Maynes.
pages cm
"Originally published as Volume 24, Issue 3 of Gender & History."
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-118-50824-4 (pbk.)
1. Sex role–History. 2. Gender identity–History. 3. Women–Identity–History. 4. Women–History. I. Gabaccia, Donna R., 1949– II. Maynes, Mary Jo. III. Gender & history
HQ1075.G4632 2013
305.309–dc23

2012048065

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Postcard (At the Golden Gate) 2009
Cover design by: Nicki Averill Design

Set in 11/12.5pt Times by Aptara Inc., New Delhi, India
Printed in Malaysia by Ho Printing (M) Sdn Bhd

1 2013

Gender History Across Epistemologies

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Introduction: Gender History Across Epistemologies

Donna R. Gabaccia and Mary Jo Maynes

The cover image, *Postcard (At the Golden Gate) 2009*, is Ruth Claxton's re-working of a Victorian oil painting by Valentine Cameron Prinsep. Prinsep's original evokes orientalist fantasies of the languorous, passive and submissive woman of the East and embodies the masculine gaze so pervasive in western art. Claxton's pointed slashing gives the formerly passive subject a gaze of her own, and a sharp one at that. She still looks downward, but the passivity suggested by her stance is contested by the potential for her instantly to turn her gaze toward the viewer; with beams emanating from her eyes, she has become the gazer, the seer. At the same time, Claxton's alteration draws critical attention to the embodied stereotype of the eastern female. It leads us to notice the performance of gender: underneath the lush exterior, the hyper-feminine draperies and bracelets, who is actually there? Viewed this way, the image provokes epistemological insights even as it re-represents gender stereotypes. The familiar gendered image becomes ambiguous and indeterminate. The once passive object of scrutiny, in becoming the viewer, focuses our attention on the relationship between knowledge and perspective that has long held a central place in feminist epistemology. Thus *Postcard (At the Golden Gate) 2009* provides a perfect point of entry into a special issue of *Gender & History* devoted to the theme of 'Gender History across Epistemologies'.

Epistemological critiques – questions about how we know what we know – are intrinsic to gender history. Indeed, the claim that all knowledges are views from somewhere has been a core insight of modern western feminist theory since its emergence in the 1960s. This claim, in sum, has insisted that the perspective of the knower shapes what he or she looks at, sees and ultimately can know. Questioning the claim to objective truth prevalent in many disciplines, feminists undertook analyses of masculinist biases inherent in theory and practice in many fields of knowledge. Parallel critiques that subsequently emerged within disciplinary fields leapt over their borders and thus contributed to a wider awareness of perspectivity as a key element of feminist epistemology.

Feminist historians, in bringing a gendered perspective into history, in deploying gender as an analytic category and in studying it as an historical construct, have nevertheless proceeded from a variety of epistemological frameworks and used a correspondingly wide range of methods, developed through debate as well as through interdisciplinary borrowing.[1] Among these debates, the most pervasive and

Gender History Across Epistemologies, First Edition. Edited by Donna R. Gabaccia and Mary Jo Maynes.

epistemologically profound is undoubtedly the one, dating to the mid-1980s, that posited 'gender history' as a non-essentialist alternative to 'women's history'. This debate, which in turn reflected the wider postmodern critique of the practices of social history, continued into the 1990s, when cultural and social historians' research practices and ways of knowing seemed starkly different and when the interdisciplinary alliances of the two groups of historians seemed to diverge particularly sharply.

These disputes began with calls for deconstructing the category of 'woman', based on the assertion that the category 'woman' does not exist pre-discursively – that is, 'woman' is not an objective, trans-historical category rooted in biology, but rather that categories like 'woman' are constructed in and through human culture and especially language.[2] Drawing on and pushing beyond post-structuralist philosophers, historian Joan Scott's enormously influential work initiated an ongoing historiographical interest in gender as a pervasive signifier of power relations; indeed, in the eyes of many subsequent historians of gender, the history of sexual difference came to centre on the cultural processes, especially as manifest in language and systems of representation, whereby meaning is created and power legitimised.[3] Implicit in much of this work was a critique of prior feminist historical scholarship that had instead sought to limn dimensions of female experience and trace women's exercise of historical agency even under changing and diverse conditions of male domination. Cultural historians argued that such histories naturalised rather than challenged sexual difference, especially when sexual difference was in effect reduced to a biological category.

Throughout the 1990s, the shift to discourse analysis was welcomed and practiced in some circles, but also resisted and analysed.[4] Treating gender and sex primarily as cultural constructions inspired many new approaches to historical scholarship; however, many feminist historians continued to insist on the importance of analysing how gender related to a material world they posited as existing independently of language, and others worried about the potential for the turn to gender history to undermine feminist political efforts built around the political identity 'women'. In the eyes of some feminist historians, furthermore, making women's experiences more visible seemed quite compatible with the cultural project of examining '[t]he process whereby . . . difference was constituted'.[5] Perhaps, as Scott later concluded, gender history seemed so exciting in the 1990s precisely because of 'its radical refusal to settle down, to call even a comfortable lodging a "home"'.[6]

This refusal to settle down, we would suggest, still describes the varied epistemological premises of scholars in gender history. However, except when making programmatic statements or engaging directly in debate, historians of gender often leave their epistemological groundings implicit rather than explicit. Ignoring these differences does not make them go away, and the aim of this special issue is to examine how various ways of knowing operate in current historical research on gender and, through specific examples, to draw to the surface lurking questions of epistemological clash, convergence or, perhaps, reconciliation.

Since epistemological disputes have been an ongoing feature of gender history, why do we offer a special issue on 'Gender Histories across Epistemologies' at this particular moment? This special issue reflects our conviction that recent approaches to gender history suggest surprising crossovers and even common grounds that debaters of the 1990s did not imagine. Indeed, most of the authors in this special issue, while referring to earlier controversies, do not feel obliged to position themselves exclusively

within them. Most, instead, chip passages through or detour around older impasses. Often they incorporate into their analyses insights seemingly based on multiple ways of knowing, including some – for example quantitative data analysis generally associated with positivist approaches – that were once viewed as incompatible or irreconcilable with the premises of gender history.

This is not to say that differing ways of knowing, differing methods and differing disciplinary instincts have lost their power. For example, some of the cross-epistemological conversations we were looking to encourage did not materialise. In particular, and despite the invitation in this issue's call for papers for work employing quantitative methods, we received only two submissions centring on the use of quantitative data: Nancy Green's discussion of gender in migration history in the United States and France and Emma Moreton's linguistic analysis of a corpus of migrant letters. While these two authors demonstrate how they reconcile gender analysis and quantitative methods, the larger project of bringing empiricist epistemologies into conversation with gender history still appears to be daunting, though not impossible.

Moreover, we saw evidence of the continuing power of disciplinary frames, for example, throughout the complex editorial process that created this special issue. The authors whose work is included come from a wide range of disciplinary or interdisciplinary locations including, in addition to history: classics, gender/sexuality studies, education, English literature, history of science and medicine, linguistics, sociology and theatre studies. Each submission was sent to outside reviewers, and in the vast majority of cases the topics addressed made it necessary to engage reviewers from at least two different disciplines. As we soon discovered, however, reviewers offered more than usually divergent evaluations of the paper they had been asked to review. A typical outcome was trenchant critique from one reader and enthusiastic encouragement from the other. As editors, we insisted that authors respond to the whole range of comments which, in turn, posed challenges for almost all authors in revising their articles for publication. Although we are pleased with the generosity of the authors in responding so positively to radically different readings and evaluations of their work, we cannot help but observe that powerful scepticism is still likely to be expressed when scholars cross boundaries or attempt to bridge or complement theories, methods or assumptions that still define the disciplines, whether or not the underlying issue is epistemological.

Collectively the essays in this special issue suggest how, and with what consequences, historians of gender are crossing disciplinary, methodological, national, linguistic, historiographical, temporal and generational divides; in doing so they are building on past debates while exploring new opportunities for resolving them. They do this, first, by reminding feminist historians to query gender as a category of analysis, just as much as they do other categories, as Jeanne Boydston advocated in her influential 2008 essay published in this journal.[7] For example, Beth Severy-Hoven, in her analysis of wall art in ancient Pompeii, reminds us not only that we should avoid undue assumptions about what gender means transhistorically, but also to be cautious about the place of gender – vis-á-vis other – dynamics at work in a particular situation. Similarly, Shirin Saeidi's research on nationalism and gender in recent Iranian history has led her to rethink her presumptions and the analytic role of gender: 'gender and sexuality can simultaneously be categories, questions and tools', she argues. This messiness and interdependence marks as 'methodologically impractical any prescription for prioritising or de-prioritising gender as a category'.[8]

They do this, too, by engaging with and historicising earlier debates and moments of gender scholarship, by mobilising their acknowledgment of epistemological difference to understand better the intellectual and political genealogies of gender history and by recognising the dialectical processes that mark the evolution of fields of scholarship, while also questioning what is possible or constructive in terms of cross-epistemological conversations at the current moment of gender history. Readers can thus draw on the collected articles to ponder epistemological questions in a range of ways. Several articles can be usefully read for their explicit focus on knowledge production as a gendered historical process. The related articles by Helga Satzinger and Christina Benninghaus, for example, speak closely to each other on the theme of scientific research on sex, gender and reproduction. Helga Satzinger's article about research on genetics and hormones in Germany in the early twentieth century explores the gendered character of the 'scientific method' at multiple levels: by documenting the gender order that scientists observed at the cellular level; by examining the research lab as a gendered workplace and by noting ideological debates about gender that infused the scientists' social and political worlds. Satzinger, in turn, sees her investigation as contributing to epistemology in the realm of historiography as well as that of science: '[b]y unravelling the politics of multiple gender concepts in the sciences of the early twentieth century', Satzinger writes, 'I hope to link the history of the scientific study of sex difference with gender historians' work on multiplicities of genders and their continuous renegotiation'.[9]

Christina Benninghaus, who focuses her contribution on a related problem in the history of science and medicine – namely, research on infertility in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Germany – takes a quite different approach. While cognisant of the interplay among cultural presumptions that shaped knowledge production, such as the role of male doctors' expectations in their interactions with patients or questions of propriety surrounding the collection of sperm samples, Benninghaus draws on evidence of medical research practices in the framework of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) to question prevailing grand narratives that chart the triumph of a 'two-sex model' and emphasise the historical pathologisation of the female body. Following Latour's suggestions, Benninghaus connects the history of the instruments and procedures used in science and medicine with a wide range of actors interested in questions of infertility. She includes not only medical doctors and researchers, but also patients and their spouses, media and the wider public, and examines the various 'loops' that build the large network in which the understanding of, and practices around, infertility evolved. Gender still plays a large role in this analysis, but not the same role that has heretofore prevailed. According to Benninghaus, gender provided 'a contemporary set of ideas about masculinity, femininity and sex difference' that was 'used as a resource, explanation and argument by those negotiating infertility'.[10] For all of their differences, both authors problematise in provocative ways the relationship between scientific knowers constructing knowledge about sex and gender and their objects of study; the articles' purview includes scientific instruments and microscopic entities along with the human actors who more commonly populate historical narratives.

In a very different realm – a study of nationalism, citizenship and gendered violence in Iran in the 1980s – Shirin Saeidi also calls for explicit attention to processes of knowledge production in her contribution. She does so both by developing a critique of the overly generalised conceptions – such as the gendered nature of nationalism

and nation building projects – that circulate in the field of feminist conflict studies, and also by problematising her own relationship to the women she interviewed in her research process. Probing that relationship can reorient the researcher. On another front, Saeidi calls attention to aspects of the interviews and memoirs she discusses that resonate through a surprisingly large number of other articles in this issue: in her analysis, words are not 'mere words' but also performances, actions in their own right 'used to express interviewees' disapproval of, or allegiance to, reformist or conservative political movements in Iran. At the same time, and perhaps outside of their intentions, they were also displaying how state-sponsored associations between gender, sexuality and the nation during war might be acted upon on the ground'.[11]

Pursuing this theme of words as performances, we are struck by authors' recurrent questioning of what counts as action and how to read and interpret words as forms of action. While obviously echoing the call for attention to language at the core of earlier epistemological debates, these newer approaches proceed from quite distinct ways of reading words and texts. Benninghaus, for example, describes three different types of readings she deploys when approaching the sources: 'using texts, statistics and published cases to grasp a "reality" otherwise not accessible, understanding them as communication at least partly structured by intentions and reading them as representations, as texts reflecting contemporary ways of thinking'.[12] However, the articles based on research on letters (the process involved in producing this issue yielded four such studies) perhaps provide the most pointed illustration of different ways of reading. They can productively be read in juxtaposition with one another to explore the kind of knowledge that letters can yield; by reading across these articles, we can literally read across epistemologies.

Liz Stanley and Helen Dampier use the letters of the white South African writer Olive Schreiner to assess her political influence. They begin their inquiry with large epistemological questions that might pertain to any historical inquiry: '[w]ith what certainty can knowledge claims about the past be advanced? Can cause and effect links be demonstrated . . . And if . . . [they] . . . can, then what is appropriate and sufficient evidence to convincingly show this?' To make claims about cause and effect in the question of Schreiner's political influence, Stanley and Dampier reconstruct and then analyse what they term 'the Schreiner epistolarium' – a corpus of extant letters that 'has interesting characteristic features, presences and absences'.[13] They depart from the ways that historians have often read letters – that is, within an epistemological framework in which letters are largely understood in terms of their reference to events in the author's life. When historians read letters this way, they tend to see them as problematic sources because of their perspectivity and their embeddedness in very particular relationships. Instead, Stanley and Dampier emphasise the 'performative character' of Schreiner'sletters by demonstrating through their examples how 'these letters in and of themselves changed things'. The supposed deficiencies of letters when viewed as representations of past events, through this new way of reading, are transformed into strengths 'because they provide an analytical purchase on understanding context and its dynamics'.[14] The new way of approaching these particular documents, the authors suggest, opens up new possibilities for observing the operation of agency on the margins – in this case, marginality defined by gender and imperial power.

Emma Moreton starts her analysis of a large corpus of Irish emigrant letters with a critique that echoes that of Stanley and Dampier in some respects. She points to

the usual way of analysing such letters primarily as representational and based upon reading the words to interpret the author's meaning with reference to its broader social or cultural context. Some scholars, Moreton notes, have looked at linguistic patterns in letters, focusing for example on exemplary linguistic strategies or word patterns. Moreton makes a distinction between this type of approach and her own approach – corpus linguistics. Her more systematic linguistic analysis of a corpus of letters, a quantitatively large though necessarily partial subset of an unspecifiable universe of letters (here echoing in some respects Stanley and Dampier's 'epistolarium'), reminds us that studies that employ other methods of reading letters often rest on unexamined assumptions about the place of a given letter in the social, cultural or epistolary context in which it is embedded. Although we can know many things from the careful reading of single letters, we cannot know how representative they are of 'letters' more generally, or even of a particular correspondence.

Therefore, Moreton argues, to make strong knowledge claims about gendered language based on a huge body of sources such as emigrant letters, an alternative approach is necessary, one that, like Stanley and Dampier's, treats letters as 'acts' rather than as representations. However, in contrast to Stanley and Dampier's approach, Moreton 'decontextualises the components of language'. The 'way of knowing' that Moreton describes and employs – corpus linguistics – offers an alternative way of reading letters based on data collection from large numbers of texts. Her analysis assesses frequencies of usages of words or terms and distributional patterns, and moves back and forth between the individual letter and the group of letters, 'noticing what is typical or unusual about one text when compared with many texts'. The point of this way of reading is not to capture lived experience. It aims, rather, to distance the analyst from lived experience, 'taking language out of its flow and reality, freezing it and rearranging it to give "new perspectives on the familiar"'.[15] Moreton matches her methodology closely to the types of knowledge claims she seeks to make and prove based on the body of letters. Claims about how we know what we know are thus central to both of these articles; each presents and defends a distinctive epistemology for reading gender history in/into letters.

For Sonia Cancian letters also perform actions; in the particular case of the migrant letters she examines, they are exercises in identity building and in maintaining a human relationship. The letter writers create and sustain a long-distance relationship through letters that draw upon, work with and sometimes reformulate specific cultural models. Their gender ideologies are drawn variously from opera, the folk conventions of their Italian villages or new behaviours they encounter (for example, hunting in Canada). But Cancian reads them not merely for how they reveal the operation of gender ideology, but also as evidence of 'the myriad ways in which the writers push these ideologies in one way or another'.[16] The letters are doing important work that constructs gender in a particular social relationship.

The fourth contributor who works with letters, Meritxell Simon-Martin, tacks back and forth between letters and paintings in her analysis of British feminist Barbara Bodichon's self-construction as a female artist. Like the other authors we have discussed, Simon-Martin conceives of her approach to both types of sources as an alternative to a simply empirical reading. She does not treat the letters as an archive from which knowledge about Bodichon can be plucked. Parallel to the ways of reading presented by Cancian and Stanley and Dampier, Simon-Martin emphasises the

performative dimensions of the Bodichon letters and their usefulness as a point of entry, not into Bodichon's authentic self, but rather into her ongoing project of self presentation – and specifically of her self-presentation as a female artist. Bodichon's letter writing 'is not an expression of the self', Simon-Martin argues, but '[r]ather the self-narrating subject is an effect of the autobiographical act; [Bodichon] is partially constituted through the act of letter writing'. Additionally, we should add, Simon-Martin interprets even Bodichon's self-categorisation in sources such as the 1880 census and her marriage certificate – sources that are so often treated as repositories of facts – as acts of self-construction. She points to such declarations as especially important for women 'afflicted with the curse of amateurism' that was a component of nineteenth-century bourgeois femininity.[17] By declaring her profession as artist in official records, Bodichon challenged the limits of this gender ideology.

Simon-Martin views Bodichon's paintings as another site of the same project of self-construction, a site marked by distinctive generic characteristics. Bodichon at times uncritically adopts the conventions of these artistic genres. For example, her picture *Sisters Working in our Fields* is 'embedded in the systems of signification on which Bodichon drew to produce it. Most notably, Bodichon's public self-projection as a landscapist specialised in Algeria is complicit with discourses on orientalism'. Nevertheless, as in her writings, Bodichon was also capable of re-appropriating discourse. Her choice to create landscape paintings 'permitted Bodichon to redefine the category of female artist: she claimed landscapes as a legitimate theme for a woman painter and asserted her right to paint *en plein air*'.[18]

Simon-Martin's article is not the only one here that moves away from epistemological terrains of relative familiarity to historians accustomed to working with written records, in order to explore ways of knowing that instead – as with the woman lounging at the Golden Gate – require them to turn their gaze upon images. Beth Severy-Hoven's analysis of the wall paintings of an ancient home in Pompeii offers, literally, a new way of seeing the apparently gendered perspectivity operating in this particular historical context. As she argues, '[i]n this ancient Italian home – and I suggest in many others – a master gaze significantly inflects the male one'. Rather than reading the images separately and in a straightforward fashion as 'masculine', Severy-Hoven looks at 'the comparisons and contrasts called for by the formal compositions and juxtapositions of the paintings themselves' to read out of them 'the status of the owners as masters'. While she notes the 'vast cultural and epistemological gap between twentieth-century Euro-American psychoanalytic theory and ancient Italian concepts and experiences of gender and sexuality', identifying that gap allows her to see in images of torture, suffering and sexual submission resonances of the slave/master relationship rather than a straightforward mechanism of gender differentiation.[19]

To mention one final example of experimentation with knowing based on attentiveness to the visual, Meredith Heller's analysis of the Teatro Campesino between 1968 and 1980 draws upon a range of sources including written texts, but important aspects of her argument rest on exploring what she calls '*mestiza* performance practices'. This takes her into the realm of reading photographs, fliers and other visual media to illustrate 'instances of male/female, non-female, androgynous, sexless and otherworldly genderbending performance by Chicanas'.[20] By 'gazing', Heller is able to 'see' the agency and resistance of the female performers in a theatre group that has frequently been studied as an example of how gendered relationships of power remained