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**A Companion to**  
**Gender Studies**



Edited by

**Philomena Essed,  
David Theo Goldberg  
& Audrey Kobayashi**



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A Companion to  
**Gender Studies**

Advisory editor: David Theo Goldberg, University of California, Irvine

This series aims to provide theoretically ambitious but accessible volumes devoted to the major fields and subfields within Cultural Studies, whether as single disciplines (Film Studies) inspired and reconfigured by interventionist Cultural Studies approaches, or from broad interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives (Gender Studies, Race and Ethnic Studies, Postcolonial Studies). Each volume sets out to ground and orientate the student through a broad range of specially commissioned articles and also to provide the more experienced scholar and teacher with a convenient and comprehensive overview of the latest trends and critical directions.

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# Contributors

Madelaine Adelman	School of Justice Studies, Arizona State University, USA
Ifi Amadiume	Department of Religion, African and African American Studies Program, Women and Gender Studies Program, Dartmouth College, USA
Carol Lee Bacchi	Politics, School of History and Politics, University of Adelaide, Australia
Abigail B. Bakan	Political Studies, Queen's University, Canada
Mieke Bal	Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Vikki Bell	Sociology Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK
Nitza Berkovitch	Department of Behavioral Sciences, Ben Gurion University, Israel
Linda Briskin	Social Science Division/School of Women's Studies, York University, Canada
Irene Dankelman	University Center for Environmental Studies, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands; Women's Environment and Development Organization, New York, USA
Mona Domosh	Department of Geography, Dartmouth College, USA
Lesley Doyal	School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, UK
Enakshi Dua	School of Women's Studies, York University, Canada
Philomena Essed	Department of Geography and Planning, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Women's Studies/African-American Studies, University of California, Irvine, USA

## List of Contributors

Tovi Fenster	Department of Geography and Human Environment, Tel Aviv University, Israel
Ellen Fernandez-Sacco	Office for History of Science & Technology, University of California, Berkeley, USA
Agneta H. Fischer	Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Katherine Franke	School of Law, Columbia University, USA
David Theo Goldberg	University of California Humanities Research Institute; African-American Studies/ Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine, USA
Inderpal Grewal	Women's Studies, University of California, Irvine, USA
Ratiba Hadj-Moussa	Sociology, York University, Canada
Judith Halberstam	Department of Literature, University of California, San Diego, USA
Sandra Harding	Department of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
Sara Helman	Department of Behavioral Sciences, Ben Gurion University, Israel
Jennifer Hyndman	Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada
Tony Jefferson	Department of Criminology, Keele University, UK
Laura Hyun Yi Kang	Women's Studies, University of California, Irvine, USA
Caren Kaplan	Department of Women's Studies, University of California, Berkeley, USA
Kamala Kempadoo	Division of Social Science, York University, Canada
Audrey Kobayashi	Department of Geography, Queen's University, Canada
Nina Laurie	School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, University of Newcastle, UK
Mary Maynard	Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, UK
Amâde M'charek	Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Cecilia Menjivar	School of Justice Studies, Arizona State University, USA
Toby Miller	Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Department of American Studies/ Department of Cinema Studies, New York University, USA

## List of Contributors

Lorraine Nencel	Department of Social Research Methodology, Free University, The Netherlands
Joanna Regulska	Department of Women's and Gender Studies and Department of Geography, Rutgers University, USA
Martha Saavedra	Center for African Studies, University of California, Berkeley, USA
Laura Shanner	John Dossetor Health Ethics Center, University of Alberta, Canada
Ella Shohat	Departments of Art and Public Policy, Middle Eastern Studies, and Comparative Literature, New York University, USA
Anita Silvers	Department of Philosophy, San Francisco State University, USA
D. Alissa Trotz	Sociology and Equity Studies/Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada
Annelies E. M. van Vianen	Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Lois A. West	Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Florida International University, USA
Ruth Wodak	Department of Linguistics, University of Vienna, Austria; Collegium Budapest, Hungary
Iris Marion Young	Political Science Department, University of Chicago, USA
Pamela Dickey Young	Department of Religious Studies, Queen's University, Canada



# Acknowledgments

We have been concerned in composing *A Companion to Gender Studies* not to opt for exhaustive coverage, an impossible task anyway, but to conjure up and encourage the connections between established and innovative directions in Gender Studies, to consider where the field stands and seems to be forging forward, and to take the tradition seriously while breaking new ground. Thus, we have been particularly interested in indicating emergent thematics into which contemporary Gender Studies has made forays, to draw especially on the expertise of as broad a range of globally located interlocutors as we could muster, in research interests and backgrounds and geographic circulations. The result, we submit, is a rich conversation between themes and contributions long at the heart of Gender Studies and those that new global conditions today are making imperative. We have been insistent throughout to acknowledge the critical ground-clearing, foundational interventions of feminism, without which Gender Studies today would not be conceivable.

For seeing us through the process of editing this volume, we are enormously grateful to the patience and professionalism of the contributors, to the folks at Blackwell, always so supportive, and to colleagues whose guidance and suggestions have enabled us to round off the volume. Andrew McNeillie at Blackwell had the foresight to see the need well ahead of most others for a field-representing volume before the area of Gender Studies could properly be said to be settled. His indomitable editorial partner at Blackwell, Jayne Fagnoli, has patiently prodded us to the point of completion where other editors might understandably have given up on us. Jayne's trust and guidance have been invaluable. The book would have been much longer in the making but for Kim Furumoto at the University of California Humanities Research Institute, whose tireless assistance in editing, suggestions, general good sense, sheer hard labor, and wonderful sense of humor once more enabled a happy outcome.

Philomena Essed  
David Theo Goldberg  
Audrey Kobayashi

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# Introduction: A Curriculum Vitae for Gender Studies

Philomena Essed, David Theo  
Goldberg, Audrey Kobayashi

## I

“Is it a boy or is it a girl?” Posed at the first moment of life, this question embeds, expresses, and enforces the common normative disposition towards the “path of life.” It signals a discursive order in the name and terms of which gender establishes itself at the moment of birth and continues to exert itself, definitive of nearly every human experience. Life is gendered. Gender at birth is at once the rebirth, the generation, of gender. It marks the course of our lives, our curriculum vitae. We hope that this volume, recording highlights in the life of Gender Studies, can serve as one CV among a range of possibilities for the field.

If gender is a constant, however, the ways in which gender is lived are highly fluid, subject to perpetual sociocultural redefinition and to individual interpretation and expression. In the chapters presented here, we attempt to capture that transforming quality of gender as both a constraint upon the ways in which people do things, a barrier to free participation, and a palimpsest of creative expression through which cultural and social practices are worked out, contested, resisted, and often redefined. Gender has a wide range of primary expressions. It (though it is “it” only when it cannot be named) expresses itself through – or as – sexuality, race, class, region, as well as other meaningful designations of human identity. Gender makes a difference not only because it sorts and categorizes humanity, but also because humanity is sorted and categorized by other discursive labels, such as class or race, by experiences in work, play, family, and civic life, which interact with gender to produce a wide variety of outcomes. This *Companion* attempts to reflect, and in multiple ways to represent, that variety.

The essays collected here benefit from the fruits of decades of earlier work by feminist and race critical scholars to understand, analyze, and challenge the

distinct ways in which gender serves as a significant marker of social identity. Some of the scholars included here have been on the front lines of gender and race critical work for decades; others are more recent arrivals. All are dedicated to understanding how society is structured as a gendered negotiation of identity, interests, place, and power between what are broadly and traditionally designated as women and men. They necessarily represent a range of disciplines and a variety of theoretical perspectives, as well as a generous set of perspectives on different aspects of gendered life.

To set a context for their contributions, in this introduction we provide an overview of some of the ways in which scholars engage with the slippery terms of gender. Donna Haraway's (1991) history of the contested conceptions of gender reveals the mutually constitutive relationships between the social conditions through which people manifest and elaborate gender in their everyday lives and the practices – always bounded and blinkered – through which academics and other intellectuals have defined gender as an analytical category. This process has always been profoundly political, discursively complex, and ideologically laden. Human history, moreover, is as much about resisting, changing, and denying ascriptions of gender as it is about reinforcing, legitimizing, and normalizing gendered practices. Ironically, these contesting and contrasting practices often occur simultaneously. As a result, even attempts to overcome the effects of gender – rooted in the very historical categories that we wish to challenge – cannot get past gender's overwhelming presence, its "there-ness." To meet the challenges posed by the gender concept today, then, we need to historicize both the social ideas in terms of which gender was established and took hold, and the conditions of lived gender that have defined people's lives.

When feminists of the "first wave" introduced the processes of gender contestation during the latter part of the nineteenth century, their purpose was explicitly political, with little backing from a body of theoretical texts. They were women of the modern era, sufficiently schooled in or confronted by the contradictions of Western thought to see the inequities presented by gendered life, in which men seemed to hold all the power and privilege and women seemed unable to fulfill ambitions beyond the narrow sphere of "womanly" pursuits. They fought to break these bonds. Many analysts have noted the irony of the fact that the first-wave feminists – and in particular the "Blue Stocking" activists for women's suffrage – were drawn almost exclusively from the middle classes, without exception from among white women. On the other hand, a retrospective analysis will show that the fight for freedom did not occur entirely within the self-conscious confines of that suffrage movement. First-year women's studies students in North America, for example, now almost universally learn about Sojourner Truth, whose "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio is now hailed as foundational for feminist anti-racism. Born to slavery in 1797, well before it was outlawed in New York state, Sojourner Truth saw herself as playing a role in what was to become a feminist movement, and came to be recognized, through her characteristically

courageous and tough-minded public speeches in favor of abolition and against the marginalized status of black women, however begrudgingly, as making a significant contribution to that mission.

If Sojourner Truth represented a distinct and small minority in this regard, second-wave feminism of the second half of the twentieth century, by contrast, is marked by a broadly conscious commitment to link feminist social struggles with theoretical insight. Inspired by writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, and strengthened during a period of social ruptures and challenges to authoritarian structure that occurred during the 1960s led by the likes of Germaine Greer, contemporary feminism is premised on the notion that we need to understand the concept of gender in order to change social relations. For decades, however, second-wave feminism rested on the assumption that “gender” represents a socially constructed category overlaying a more fundamental biological category called “sex.” This dualism is both dialectical and ironic. By invoking a distinction between sex and gender, early second-wave feminists were able to challenge *some* gendered practices, especially those surrounding work and careers, on the grounds that if these practices were man-made this also guaranteed their historical contingency. The recognition of women’s equality was therefore a matter of choice, not biology. Not so, however, for matters concerning reproduction, which have remained much more firmly embedded in essentialist notions of how childbearing and motherhood limit women’s spheres. According to Haraway:

the political and explanatory power of the ‘social’ category of gender depends upon historicizing the categories of sex, flesh, body, biology, race, and nature in such a way that the binary, universalizing opposition that spawned the concept of the sex/gender system at a particular time and place in feminist theory implodes into articulated, differentiated, accountable, located, and consequential theories of embodiment, where nature is no longer imagined and enacted as a resource to culture or sex to gender. (1991: 148)

Another dualism well established both in feminist scholarship and women’s political movements is that of the relationship between patriarchy and oppositional politics. In 1986 and 1991, Gerda Lerner published a two-volume set entitled *The Creation of Patriarchy* (volume I) and *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (volume II). In the first volume, she makes a case for patriarchy as the definitive motif of history, making women central to the production of life and peripheral to the process of defining life’s terms. Patriarchal concepts, she claims, are:

built into all the mental constructs of . . . civilization in such a way as to remain largely invisible. Tracing the historical development by which patriarchy emerged as the dominant form of societal order, I have shown how it gradually institutionalized the rights of men to control and appropriate the sexual and reproductive services of women. Out of this form of dominance developed other forms of dominance, such as slavery. (1991: 3)

In Lerner's binary, patriarchy is opposed by feminist consciousness, which consists of severely constrained, marginalized, and always disadvantaged, but often creative, determined, and heroic, forms of resistance, with the result that:

More than thirteen hundred years of individual struggles, disappointments and persistence have brought women to the historic moment when we can reclaim the freedom of our minds as we reclaim our past. The millennia of women's pre-history are at an end. We stand at the beginning of a new epoch in the history of humankind's thought, as we recognize that sex is irrelevant to thought, that gender is a social construct and that woman, like man, makes and defines history. (1991: 3)

If one looks at some of the texts used in recent years to introduce students to gender and feminist studies, two things will strike one about the approaches adopted. First, most of these texts assume that studying gender is about studying women. We acknowledge that there has been intense debate concerning the divide between "gender" and "women's" studies, and the respective approaches identified with each. There is an obvious need, now widely noted and acted on, for a corrective to the overwhelming "his-story" that has dominated the academy; we agree that "her-story" both needs to be told and told in relational terms. On the other hand, while there is a vast theoretical literature on the making, meanings, and management of patriarchy, and likewise a rapidly growing literature on the ways in which women experience patriarchy, there is still remarkably little on the ways in which men experience and use patriarchy. In other words, little of "his-story" is written from a feminist perspective, in critical feminist terms. For that reason, we undertake here to present gender as a relationship between the social categories of men and women, with a recognition that we shall not overcome the inequitable and iniquitous effects of gendering without understanding all the various and complex aspects of that relationship, and their interactive, unsettled, sometimes unsettling and shifting connections.

To do so is also to recognize that, as complex as gender can be, human beings are more than gendered, a blend of all the ways in which we have been constituted historically, and of the ways in which we engage the world, individually and in groups. What goes under the concept of gender is a complex and unfixed mix of significant structural and cultural or representational considerations both making and marking social distinctions between those constituted as sexes. Gender accordingly interactively characterizes social structure, individual identities, and signifying practices as well as the normative values embedded in them (Harding 1991; Braidotti 2002). Eisenstein (1996) speaks of the physicality representing the body as a complex set of political meanings that spark hatred through the establishment of otherness. Eisenstein points out that it is the simultaneity of bodily traits in particular combinations – white, male, able-bodied – that at once constitutes and denotes power, by combining in powerful interaction those conditions representing sociocultural elevations



and dominance and invoking a set of assertive, complex, and labile fantasies inscribed *upon* the body. For Eisenstein, the discursive properties of race, gender, and the human qualities they engender are written not only on the individual body but also on the body politic, the nation, and on any social structure bearing meaning.

It should be clear that in presenting gender as a set of slippery, simultaneous, and interactive discourses and forces, we do not mean to privilege gender over other forms constituting and inscribing the body. But we do want to give it its historic due and social import, as well as to open up avenues for discussion of how gender has been used historically as a force for the concentration of power upon the male side. Nevertheless, as Judith Butler has made clear, gender is as much a troubled term as a troubling set of conditions and relations, not only because of its historic effects but also because of the new obstacles and contradictions that have resulted from feminist attempts to challenge it. We do not share the view of some radical feminists that other forms of oppression are a result only, or simply, or uniquely of gender. Nor do we wish to present a simplified concept of gender as something that can be deconstructed in order to address most of the world's woes. Like Butler, we do not assume that "there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiate feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitute the subject for whom political representation is pursued" (1990: 1). Our anti-essentialism, not unlike Butler's, makes no concessions for either gender or sex.

At the same time, the fact that gender – like other forms of bodily and sociocultural identification – makes a difference means that we do not live in an undifferentiated world. In the chapters that follow, the authors have attempted to convey a sense of the range, complexity, relations, and implications of gendered differentiation, and therefore also a sense of the specificity of particular gendered contexts, expressed in particular places, cultural contexts and outcomes, and through particular social formations and imaginations. The gendered sites represented here range across institutions – the family, education, the healthcare system, labor relations – and speak from a variety of global perspectives, incorporating processes of development, location, racial constitution, and elaboration, as well as class specification. In short, the chapters presented in this volume critically reveal old and new ways of establishing, speaking, performing, acting out, and managing difference.

## II

We aim in this volume, then, to offer a comprehensive, critical and engaged overview of Gender Studies and to suggest the directions in which the field is headed. The chapters are written by leading and emerging scholars with international reputations who have made important contributions to the topics or areas that they have been commissioned to address. Most of the texts are suitable