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Introduction

More than 40 years ago the first courses in women's studies were introduced in American universities: it was the beginning of a revolution which was going to transform academic institutions in radical and unforeseeable ways. The feminist focus on the ways in which political assumptions shaped all instances of knowledge production and dissemination called into question no less than the epistemological apparatus on which universities had traditionally relied. Since their inception, feminist movements have confronted the necessity to articulate the connection between political action and theoretical reflections, as they tried to build a usable past out of the omissions which framed traditional history. The need for new historical narratives and for a new awareness of the mechanisms of historical transmission was crucial in the development of women's organizations in the US even in the XIX century, which was rhetorically shaped by the collective construction of the founding myth of Seneca Falls (Tétrault, 2015).

Even in the early 1970s, more was at stake in the feminist challenge to traditional academic fields than the addition of new disciplines either to complement the traditional spectrum of subjects or to fill in a gap, making women visible as subjects of history and knowledge production. In the wake of the epistemological revolution of radical feminism, which questioned the validity of traditional views on gender and sexuality, highlighting the aporias of binary systems based on universalist assumptions, the introduction of Women's Studies in university curricula presented a significant challenge to the structure of knowledge itself.

In 1969, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* helped shape the critical voice of this oppositional force when she read canonical authors like D.H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer "against the grain," ignoring their authorial intention and empowering a new female-oriented reader response. Feminist critics, in the wake of Millet's pioneering work, fashioned a way of reading which

combined poststructuralist notions of interpretation with an innovative form of cultural critique; they investigated the ways in which patriarchal societies had transformed sexual difference in power asymmetries and showed how sexual inequality is ingrained even in liberal, democratic systems.

When a Program in Women's Studies was first developed at the University of San Diego, the publication describing its course offerings bore the eloquent imprint "Inside the Beast" (Boxer 2002, p. 42). Many scholars have since noted how feminist struggles of the early 1970s represented the "third wave" of the fight for women's access to knowledge. When the first feminist wave gained momentum in the decades preceding the Civil War, women's right to university education was one of its main goals. The second wave, at the beginning of the XX century, fought for the right to access so-called "men's curricula" both in Ivy League women's colleges and in coeducational state universities. The "third wave" Women's Studies Programs, which started after 1970, were immediately successful, and their first courses were offered on opposite sides of the country, in San Diego and Cornell; within a few years, hundreds of Women's Studies courses became available to U.S. students. Another important event took place in 1972, when *Feminist Studies* began its publication: it was the first scientific journal devoted to women's studies, and scores of other influential journals and international reviews were to follow, opening up the academic field which would later encompass gender, queer and intersectional studies.

Despite its mainstream success, which was enormous even in terms of its impact on the academic publishing market, Women's Studies – in the wake of the women's liberation movement, the civil rights movement, and the politics of the New Left – retained its oppositional agency and criticized severely the contradictions which had marked the development of American democracy and the hegemonic drift of its foreign politics. Women's Studies were also eccentric – an *undisciplined* discipline – in its attacks on the exceptionalist discourse which pervaded United States' cultural self-representation. Multiple feminist approaches converged in the creation of a field of research open to contaminations and interactions, bent on transgressing disciplinary boundaries and wary of any attempt to build new theoretical fortresses with the aim of blocking further transformations.

The tensions and rifts that have marked women's politics in the U.S. have found their way into Women's Studies, opening up an important

space of discussion where theoretical issues and political activism collided in fruitful ways, redefining their respective instruments and objectives. African-American feminists pointed out the peripheral role played by race in the early scholarship published in the field of Women's Studies, lesbian critics observed how homosexuality was stigmatized even by authoritative feminist intellectuals, and working-class women decried the class blindness of a mostly middle-class movement. Class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality are axes of difference that shape female subjectivity in complex ways and U.S. feminism has tried to take this complexity into account, paying only marginal attention to the essentialist readings of womanhood that proved extremely influential in Italy and France. In fact, the American success of analytical categories such as "gender" in the 1980s, "queer" in the 1990s, and "intersectional" in the past decade, has introduced new methodological paradigms and encouraged scholars to pay attention to the multiplicity of identifications that contribute to the complex process that we used to call "identity."

The transnational dimension characterizing the historical experience of women – who were both inside and outside of the nation-state as a consequence of their "imperfect" citizenship – has contributed to the crucial role played by women's and gender studies in revising traditional approaches to national identities. As Alice Kessler-Harris points out, "although transnationalism has opened up a ground for gendered comparisons, gender has been one of the integrative devices that have enabled the practice of an international or transnational history" (Kessler-Harris, "A Rich and Adventurous Journey" 153). Both in political practices and in theoretical reflections, the term "transnational" (Briggs, McCormick and Way) has proven more effective and useful than "global" in its ability to signal the importance of differences, of border crossings, and of the processes of spatial and symbolic dislocation which characterize the movements of men, goods and ideas (Porter 44). In order to face the complex challenges entailed in reshaping identities and gender relations, universalistic categories have to be resignified, specifically in those novel assemblages of territory and sovereignty that do not merely call the state into question but also redefine its role (Sassen), or in that third "space" which is the outcome of migrations that reconfigure the connections between local and global (Bhabha; Mezzadra).

Commenting on the success of her influential 1986 essay in which she described gender as “a useful category of historical analysis,” Joan Scott states that “‘Gender’ is about asking historical questions; it is not a programmatic or methodological treatise. It is above all an invitation to think critically about how the meanings of sexed bodies are produced, deployed, and changed” (Scott, “Gender” 1423). At the same time, in the past thirty years “gender” has also become the representative sign of a new phase of feminist theory, an idealized instrument aimed at overcoming the limitations associated with the term “women.” As Robyn Wiegman argues, both as a category of analysis and as an object of study, “gender” has been associated with theoretical sophistication, representational inclusion, and subjective complexity, while the category “women” has been linked to exclusions and naive insularity. The development of gender as a “progress narrative,” a way to leave behind the universalizing effects associated with the use of “women,” has led to a “field imaginary in which *gender* has emerged as the privileged supplement, if not the collectivizing sign, for political attachment in the afterlife of *women*” (Wiegman 41).

The turn from *women* to *gender* in search of higher levels of critical coherence and theoretical complexity has recently been subjected to criticism, leading to a further transformation of the field, characterized by references to transnational practices and histories that complicate received ideas about sex, culture, sexuality and politics. In this context, the category of intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has been widely invoked as a way to resist single-axis analysis of identity.

Have these changes really affected the way in which we work, our disciplinary paradigms, or our critical aspirations? We asked five major feminist scholars from various fields and backgrounds – Italian and American, historians and literary critics – to describe their perspectives on recent developments in our academic investigations into women’s knowledge production and dissemination. Our hope is that their answers to our questions, and the bibliography they suggest, will enable readers to get a current view of a crucial field of inquiry.

Questions:

1. *The emergence of both women's and gender studies was characterized by the strong connection between women's politics and feminist reflection. In your opinion, is this connection still vital? Or is a trend toward a more 'scientific' (and perhaps more neutral) methodological approach prevailing?*

GIOVANNA COVI

My extensive experience allows me to speak both about movements and the academy, and reply to your first question with an emphatic yes. As finely argued by Joan W. Scott (2008), women's and gender studies lose their relevance when they are not positioned "on the edge." To resist resting on institutional success and producing aseptic thinking, again and again I introduce my Gender Studies graduate course in Philosophy by underscoring that I only teach Feminist Studies of Gender. Plainly, the risk of losing critical purchase and becoming guardians of the very Law that we were challenging as we entered the academy – against which back in 1984 Jacques Derrida had already pointedly forewarned us ("Women") – could not be countered by opting for alternative spaces, as Italian feminists did. Our engagement with deconstructing the notion of subjectivity within our own field of inquiry requires seeking a more complex balance between radically revolutionary and dangerously reactive stances. Today the map of academic gender studies is as fragmented, varied and changing as that of feminist movements. I take this as a positive sign. In places where scholars comfortably rest on the given, feminist concepts are transformed into technical formulas, orderly methodologies, and systemic theories, and the critical inquiry of difference is frozen into a discourse that makes no difference either to lived lives or to disciplinary status. On the contrary, where a feminist interrogation of orthodoxies is steadily engaged, *gender* is deployed as a heuristic tool of critical investigation of differences, rather than as a qualifier of a field of studies that only pretends to be more trendy than women's studies; it signifies the porously unstable and dynamic interrelation between sex and gender that Judith Butler keeps probing – since *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), through *Undoing Gender* (2004) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) to *Precarious*

Life (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009) up to the most recent *Senses of the Subject* (2015) and *Notes Towards a Theory of Assembly* (2015) – in order to relentlessly break epistemic boundaries and account for material lives as carefully and respectfully as possible.

ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

I bristle at the notion that women's studies is not in some sense appropriately neutral: that it is not as "scientific" a subject as any other of the soft social sciences. It seems to me that we historians and students of American culture have learned from our study of women that all human study is political, and that there is no such thing as neutrality in the search for human knowledge. From the beginning of the 1960s on, new left scholars argued that prevailing belief systems (hegemonic ideologies) shape the questions we ask and the ways we imagine answers. In the United States, most such ideologies remained invisible and unproblematized in scholarly practice. I think here of the "liberal" historiographical interpretations that prevailed in the years following World War II, when historians agreed that Americans had experienced "consensus" – agreement around democratic values informed by growing prosperity. It took the popular outbursts of the 1960s for historians to recognize that much of America had never lived within such a consensus. In contrast, when historians began to ask questions that hovered around race and feminism, they were immediately labeled as biased. In the generation of women (my generation) trained in the sixties and the early seventies, the connection to women's politics emerged in large part from activism in the anti-war and civil rights movements. Only towards the end of the 1960s did many of us, inspired by our own discomfiting experiences in social movements, and by our marginalization in the academic workplace, join consciousness-raising groups and begin to actively embrace a women's politics. Historians of women were then accused of politicizing history. We replied that the questions historians ask grow out of their own environments, that every historical interpretation harbors within it the politics of its author; that only when we recognize our subjective positions in the identification and use of evidence will we come close to fair and judicious interpretation.

ROBYN MUNCY

I believe that the connection between feminist politics and scholarship on women and gender remains vital. I am trying to think of any work of U.S. women's history that does not have at its heart the hope of achieving gender justice; I cannot come up with one. Works of women's and gender history generally aim to understand the means by which different kinds of women have been subordinated to men (as well as to each other) and the methods by which different kinds of women have resisted subordination and chipped away at gender injustice. These works are driven by and contribute to feminist politics. Indeed, in the absence of a mass movement on behalf of women's advancement, feminist scholarship remains a reliable site for nurturing feminist politics. I do not think, however, that a commitment to feminist politics makes these works any less "scientific." They are disciplined by the same requirements for producing knowledge as other works of history. In fact, no one needs a more accurate understanding of the past than someone who is trying to learn from that past how best to proceed in the present or future.

ELLEN ROONEY

I thus have to conclude that the project of making my own erotic unconscious participate in my reading practice, far from guaranteeing some sort of radical or liberating breakthrough, brings me face to face with the political incorrectness of my fantasy life.

Barbara Johnson

The connection between women's politics and feminist reflection in the age of gender studies degrees and chaired professors of feminist theory is without question still vital. Is this vital bond serene and nurturing, reflexively supportive, and grounded in untroubled solidarity? No. But the asymmetries and real conflicts that mark the relationship between feminism in the university and feminism in other sites, other workplaces and institutions, is an asset, not a glitch, another form of resistance to the assumption that feminisms should adopt a single template or could pursue a totalizing analysis. Feminist politics has never been simply women's

politics or the politics of women, never actually unified women or spoken for all of them. And resistance to the fiction of a single politics for women is not merely a reluctant accommodation to the impossibility of unifying feminisms, making them “speak for women” without qualifications and exceptions. Feminism’s greatest political and theoretical insights are not into the conflicts between men and women (repeating the ancient clichés of the war of the sexes) but into the conflicts among women; these disparities and frictions mark the category of women at every moment and disclosing them in their many avatars puts the lie to the phallogentric conceit that would assign Woman her fixed and subordinate place.

The political conflicts and antagonisms *among* women guarantee that multiple political and theoretical battles will be fought on various fronts. These conflicts and antagonisms exist among all women, including those who seem to share obvious identity positions and solidarities. They exist among black women and among white women, among lesbian women, working class women, transgender women, among academic women and among activist women. This is one of the lessons that intersectionality and transnational feminisms teach us. Such conflicts in fact enable feminisms to think and struggle with the heterogeneous operations of sexual differences and thus to engender unforeseeable critical and political effects. From this perspective, the academy is a genuine field of political engagement among others, but the university is not the sole site of feminist theorizing. The vitality of the bonds entangling academic feminisms and feminist activism is expressed both in solidarity and in dissent.

Indeed, the claim that “Gender and Sexuality Studies” (its rubric at my home institution) is insufficiently entwined with feminism’s activist politics is older than gender studies itself. And this critique emerges from all quarters, from inside and outside the university, from the beginning student and the influential philosopher, on behalf of the urgency of action and of the vigilance of critique. In the 1970s, as an undergraduate on a committee to consider the founding of a women’s studies program, I loudly worried that once feminism was institutionalized and students no longer assembled their intellectual programs by combining courses from various departments with independent studies and reading groups, our radical critique would dissipate. Not many years later, Jacques Derrida spoke about “the status of ‘women’s studies’ as an institution” at the Pembroke

Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University (where I had just been hired). Under the rubric of “Women in the Beehive,” Derrida noted the necessity and the risk entailed in simultaneously pursuing positive feminist knowledge, filling the gaps the university produces around the category of women, and pressing women’s studies’ unprecedented disruption of the fundamental model of the university, its disciplinary fields, and epistemological assumptions. While gender studies cannot refuse to build its cell in the university beehive, precisely *because* it takes that risk, it has the potential to unsettle the subjects of disciplinary work, sexual difference, and political action: it cannot be neutralized and so forces us to rethink the scientific and the scientist. What counts as politics, as subjectivity, as theory or science, is always in motion; we recalibrate their vital relations again and again. Feminist scholars and activists thus refuse the lure of a feminism that simply repeats, in tactics or in conceptualizations.

Academic feminisms are thus directly political, and women’s movements always theoretical revolutions. Barbara Johnson’s “Lesbian Spectacles” confronts the contradictions these facts engender in the unsettling insight that by reading “as a lesbian” she has unearthed her politically suspect (and unconscious) attachment to the powers of the phallic mother, exposing “the possibility of a real disjunction between [her] political ideals and [her] libidinal investments.” Feminist literary analysis tracks desire and uncovers conflict without providing a cure for the discrepancies it reveals, and this disjunction opens on to real work to come. Johnson argues that her reading provokes a new question, the “one of knowing what the unconscious changes, and what politics repeats” (164). The “political incorrectness” of fantasy is not a sign of the fading tie between feminist thought and political struggle but a means to negotiating its uneven, shifting terrain.

ELISABETTA VEZZOSI

I believe that this connection has never been interrupted, although its dynamics have changed considerably. Since the Seventies, women’s politics and the characteristics of women’s movements have undergone a profound shift. New issues have been raised by younger generations of researchers,

who have established a controversial relationship with collective feminist projects accused of producing unreal expectations and limiting their “life options.” Some years ago, in May 2011, Karen Offen wrote that the history of feminism is a “new” political history that deals with “real issues” in “real time.” According to Offen, the history of women’s movements is, therefore, an integral part of an “expanded” political history that examines intimate and personal relationships (“the personal is political”) and subsequently branches out into the field of international and transnational relations, including participation in organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. On the other hand, Kristen A. Goss, focusing on US women’s experience, describes an “involution” of feminist movements starting from the second half of the 20th century. Particularly after the 1960s, their presence in national legislative debates declined, in fact, while their agenda was moved from issues tied up with the defense of the public good (giving a voice to those people who were undefended in state and federal halls) to the “special interests” of women. Goss is writing from a position that is very much part of the history of the United States and fails to grasp the potentiality offered to gender studies by the transnational women’s movements and the issues they promote. Just think, for example, of how several recent studies on women’s work (see among others Suzanne Franzway and Mary Margaret Fonow eds.; Eileen Boris and Jennifer Fish) are indebted to the experience of the International Domestic Workers Federation, the first global union led by women (which came into being in 2013 after some years of gestation during the conferences of the International Labor Organization). These new global women’s movements elaborate issues that can inspire innovative and original themes of research in the field of gender studies and produce a mutual reinforcement. Although I do not believe that the scientific approach of gender studies risks being sacrificed on the altar of politics, I feel that women’s and gender history should more strongly interact with disciplines that are more oriented towards theoretical models and make concrete the historical experience of women. I am thinking here of the richness of the 4th “European Conference on Politics and Gender” held in Sweden (Uppsala University) in 2015 in which, however, history was totally absent.

2. *Gender and sexual difference have been widely regarded as categories affecting different and sometimes antagonistic theoretical feminist approaches. Do you think this debate is still relevant in academic research? Has gender prevailed as the most viable category in scientific research and conversation (in your field of research)?*

GIOVANNA COVI

The use of the phrase *gender difference* has indeed prevailed over the phrase *sexual difference* in the past three decades. Yet again, when *gender* is used as a replacement of *sex*, the discourse that is being produced is not vital to the production of thinking differently. We can now rely on a powerful discourse built on “naturculture” (Donna Haraway) and articulated in terms of “gendersex” (Biddy Martin), rather than the established but untenable dichotomy of sex=biology and gender=culture. This rich and vital discourse has produced a way of knowing not only a subject situated outside/beside the dichotomy nature vs culture (see Eve K. Sedgwick), a subject which I have repeatedly myself figured as *la dividua*, but also the means to cast the human as posthuman (Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti) and redefine the humanities on a planetary rather than European grounding (R. Radhakrishnan). The relevance today of the debate about gender or sexual difference in my opinion is in the debate about relationality, which cannot and should not be articulated regardless of Luce Irigaray and Teresa de Lauretis, but which is calling for a revision of alterity as identified with sexual difference and of semiotics as linguistic. This revision is fruitfully yielding a reconceptualization of power and violence that liberates fundamental figurations of contingent affiliations. Leela Gandhi (*Common Cause*) forcefully argues for such affiliations to be made of affective communities and to be based on the principle of *ahimsa*, a becoming common of the subject necessary for enabling radical democracy. I claim that Butler (*Senses of the Subject*) is in perfect tune with Gandhi both when she insists on the agency of vulnerability and also when she casts her performative subjectivity collectively, by reflecting upon the character of assemblies (*Theory of Assembly*). What allows me to inflect their two theories together is their emphasis on nonviolence which, Gandhi aptly specifies, is not always pacifist.

I find no better way to exemplify this revolutionary epistemology than to refer to Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise*, a neo-slave narrative that shows

nonviolent thinking siding with the armed revolution of John Brown, queer feminist subjects building affective communities that seek inclusiveness rather than domination or assimilation, and agencies that achieve ethical-political intrasubjective self-understanding without assuming transcendental morality, precisely as advocated by Gandhi (*Affective Communities*). While I am deeply grieved by Cliff's recent passing, I am grateful to her for figuring subjects marginalized by the institution of slavery without recurring to any abstract taxonomies, and for showing us that agencies can be pulled together by relations. Cliff enables them to actively engage the making of radical albeit always imperfect and temporary democracy, because for them "the People" is not an abstract ideal, but rather the result of performative oppositional gathering (Butler, *Theory of Assembly*) through a daily heuristic, pragmatic making. Sometimes this making is as contradictory as being armed and being nonviolent, because the only thing that kept such de-humanized constituencies going was the only thing that they had – their bodies. Just think of the central cultural meaning of dancing in slave communities: at the end of endless hours of labor imposed upon slaves because they do not own their bodies, dancing represents the claiming of one's own body. Dancing is the body performing freedom. Likewise, gathering bodies together, assembling them, is performing one's community, becoming the People – their resistance, their survival, their resilience. Cliff's historical/fictional characters in *Free Enterprise* well show us that Butler's and Gandhi's theories of subjectivities and communities are not abstract theories but material lives that have already existed in the past, and our understanding of their existence can help us understand our present more widely and plan our future more justly. On the militant front, Eve Ensler has successfully organized the world movement One Billion Rising to stop violence against women and girls precisely by claiming space through dancing.

ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

In the early part of the 1970s many of us, newly minted PhDs, eagerly took on the challenges of investigating women. We emerged from graduate training that barely mentioned the word women; we could not name an area called gender studies. We spoke about women's studies as a new disciplinary

area meant to uncover and illuminate the historical and contemporary lives of women: a field that would help us celebrate their hidden achievements and, at the same time, explain their persistently disadvantaged positions.

To make sense of women's history we adapted the notion of gender as a social system from the work of anthropologists like Gayle Rubin. When we understood gender as a shaping force, as a system of ideas and practices within which men and women grew to understand their particular places, we began to develop more sophisticated ways of understanding how, in different societies at different times, the lives of individuals could take on different meanings. For historians, probing "the gender system" in different times and places provided a far deeper excavation of the experiences of men and women than we had previously imagined. It also offered an explanatory dimension that had not previously existed. Joan Scott's 1985 intervention in this debate fruitfully introduced the notion of power and enabled historians to approach the core of gendered relationships by asking how and where power was exercised to maintain relationships of difference and domination. Language became the key to entering the past. It also imposed limits on what we could see. The turn towards post-structuralism that Scott's insights provoked has therefore been a mixed blessing. But nothing that has happened since then has convinced me that we can manage without gender. We need to understand living and changing gender systems if we are to comprehend the lives of men and women in their own times and places and in relation to each other. We need (to paraphrase E.P. Thompson) to understand gender as a process if we are to make sense of the past.

In my own work (for example in *In Pursuit of Equity*, published in 2001), I asked why the social policies that emerged in twentieth century United States placed women in disadvantaged positions that have taken almost a century to undo. I concluded that women as well as men shared what I called a "gendered imagination" – an articulate interpretation of social order and the meaning of family that inspired certain kinds of policies with regard to old age pensions, unemployment insurance, child welfare, and much more. I have since followed the attacks on particular policies and have noted how challenges to them, and the changes of the past two decades, have emerged from changing conceptions of gender itself.

ROBYN MUNCY

Gender has become a fundamental category for comprehending U.S. history. Historians understand that what it means to be a woman varies across time and, at any one time, varies across space and social positioning, that womanhood and manhood are contested categories at all times, and that masculinity and femininity have not been associated exclusively with male and female bodies. Despite the widespread acceptance of gender, however, no one denies that the perceived sex of a person's body has had profound ramifications for their lives. Historians do, as a result, continue to study the social, intellectual, and political experiences of those perceived as women, even as they also study the processes that have produced the perception of sexual difference.

ELLEN ROONEY

What is gender, after all, but one of the most telling texts of sexual difference?

Elizabeth Weed

There seems to be a kind of peculiar impasse on this question in much work in feminist theory and across the disciplines, if the term impasse can indicate that individual researchers have adopted one category or the other and work productively in that vein, primarily in conversation with other like-minded researchers. The polemical engagement across this division has waned, but there is a certain difference in the way the advocates of the two approaches invoke and wield their own terms. Those scholars most invested in the notion of sexual difference almost never slip into the language of gender, that is, into any idiom that might blur or diminish the importance of the distinction between the two terms and especially the specificity of the category of sexual difference vis à vis questions of subjectivity, the unconscious, language and lack, and the operations of femininity and masculinity as such.

From the side of theories of gender – and maybe most consistently in the modes of analysis that literary studies calls “practical criticism” and other disciplines dub “field work” or “case studies” – the situation seems

rather different. This is not always because these scholars use the concept of gender loosely and interchangeably with the concept of sexual difference, though some do. Nor is it primarily an artifact of the heterogeneity of the sources of theories of gender, in contrast to the foundational status of psychoanalysis for most theories of sexual difference. Rather, the category of gender itself – always an extremely contentious term, even on first coming into general use, as historian Joan Scott argues in several crucial essays – is more and more pressed into a template that resembles the problematic of sexual difference. Gender is not thought as a figure that inevitably subtends binary thinking, or consistently confuses the anatomical-biological with the social, or anchors transparent identities, or names a “role,” a script to be more or less easily reformed by the conscious efforts of social movements. Gender itself has been rewritten by various feminisms as discursive operation and rhetorical effect, an unstable signifier bound to lack, displacement, and reading, to use the language of literary semiotics. Even when gender is consciously rethought by contemporary scholars who eschew the emphases on language, representation, and lack that are said to be characteristic of an excess of literariness, as in some of the newest of the new feminist materialisms, the stress remains on the relationality, mutability, effectivity, and emergent qualities of material realities, including the reality of gender. The matter of new materialism is thus determined and determining in forms that many scholars still committed to the apparently abandoned notion of the sign will find quite familiar.

The unhooking of gender from binarisms, functionalism, and fantasies of transparency and or the unmediated has a long history, of course. But, as the work of Susan Stryker, Stephen Whittle, and others establishes, transgender theorizing, activism, and cultural production are at present critical agents in thinking the “wide range of phenomena that call attention to the fact that ‘gender’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity.” (Indeed, the undeniable explosion in the visibility of transgender theorizing/culture and the urgent political organizing against attacks on transgender people notwithstanding, transgender thought and struggle have contributed to rethinking gender for many years.) The disruption of the category of women that the political conflicts among women enacts

is also an unavoidable effect of transgender analyses and practices, which entail an intersectional approach attentive to the unpredictable weave of the components of every imaginable identity. Resituating questions of determination, embodiment, and signification, refusing to settle on a single analysis designed to capture every instantiation of the effects of gender, the category of gender has become the categories of gender. Ever closer attention to the plethora of gendered effects enlarges our sense of the unpredictability, contingency, and inadequacy of each gender identification and every gendered formation. If gender is a “telling text” of sexual difference, it remains viable by cunningly tracking the permutations of genders in their as yet to be determined paths.

ELISABETTA VEZZOSI

I think that gender remains a fundamental category of historical analysis even though – since the publication of Joan W. Scott’s successful essay in 1986 until today – women’s historiography has been questioning itself on the potentialities and limits of the concept. After all, gender seems to have gone beyond the category of sexual difference because starting from Judith Butler’s works, the distinction between sex and gender is now openly challenged: “sex” does not deal with nature only, just as “gender” does not deal with culture only. For that matter, the latter category has amplified its potentiality enormously. As Joan Scott (2013) wrote recently, “If we take gender as a guide not simply to how men and women are being defined in relation to one another, but also to what visions of social order are being contested, built upon, resisted, and defended in terms of those male/female definitions, we arrive at new insight into the various societies, cultures, histories, and policies we want to investigate. Gender becomes not a guide to static categories of sexed identity, but to the dynamic interplay of imagination, regulation, and transgression in the societies and cultures we study” (126).

In my research on the international activism of African-American women between 1893 and 1960, gender is constantly present not only in the interweaving of race, but in the interaction and elaboration of the concept of leadership and of “bridge leadership” (Robnett), which gives voice to the extension, amplification and transformation of the methods of *networking* on

the part of African American women that allows them to redefine male and female power and to evaluate it on a political level, capable of reinforcing historically the permeability between formal and informal powers.

3. In the 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term 'intersectionality' to point out the overlapping of multiple and interrelating systems of oppression and discrimination. Intersectionality is an important paradigm in academic scholarship, able to improve the dialogue between women's and gender studies on the one hand and Black, Latino and Post-Colonial Studies on the other. How is this paradigm affecting your field of research, and in which context? Is there any criticism of intersectionality as a category of analysis that you consider particularly relevant?

GIOVANNA COVI

Intersectionality is central to my work, which is focused on African-American and African-Caribbean women writers. Over the years the concept has undergone prolific revisions and adaptations. I take responsibility as co-editor of the volume *Interculturality and Gender* (2009) for the choice made by the Group ReSisters in the Athena network to recast the concept in Europe in terms of *interculturality* in order to contextualize our performance of intersectional inquiry and respect the core of Crenshaw's concept – i.e., that it cannot be reduced to a mechanical layering of differences but must seek expression of the tangle of lived encounters among categories that contribute to define each specificity. The more recent figuration of the *tangle* provided by Karen Barad is a productive actualization of the original idea: if Crenshaw broke the silence, so to speak, Barad is articulating the new voice. To put it in less specific terms, I would argue that creolizing and queering must be central to any inquiry, not only to interpretations of Caribbean culture or of LGBTI identities. When thinking is aimed at acting and refuses to separate scholarship from politics, theorizing from learning/teaching, all concepts are necessarily time after time both adopted and adapted – this is equally true for *gender* and *intersectionality*. As a feminist my struggle is constantly to define concepts heuristically.

ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

The notion of “intersectionality” has dramatically changed the way that historians think and write, and there is no criticism of it that I consider particularly useful. In my view, the opposite is the case. Intersectionality provokes us to imagine gender as always already imbricated in class, race and religion, just as it shapes the idea of race and class as always already gendered. It therefore offers a more complex view of the world, even as it allows us to pursue analytically clear threads. I like to think that I was always conscious of class and race intersection. For example, my earliest essays probed the influence of class and female consciousness on women’s capacity to organize into labor movements. *Out to Work*, a book I published thirty-five years ago, included a good deal of material about African-American women. But none of that early work conceived of gender in the rich and fulsome way that intersectionality allows. I once wrote that men and women had layered world views, and that they thought and acted out of class or religious or racial priorities as historical circumstance moved them. But I now see that all these world views exist at the same time in the same person, that we do not choose which to put forward. Rather, we think as black women, or wealthy white plantation mistresses, or as Irish domestic servants all at the same time. The idea of intersectionality has influenced every branch of social history in the United States. It is central to the new history of capitalism as engaged in by Sven Beckert, for example, and in the field we now call American Political Development (Lisa McGirr on prohibition).

ROBYN MUNCY

Intersectionality has been a crucial tool for U.S. women’s/gender history, although the term may appear less often in works of history than in some other disciplines. Volumes and volumes of work demonstrate the many axes along which inequalities are structured and the ways that various social positionings are created and in turn create variable life possibilities for women. Woman as an undifferentiated category is rarely invoked.

Although we could choose virtually any area within U.S. women’s history to illustrate the centrality of intersectionality (to life experience and historical analysis), I will focus here on the history of feminism. For

the last twenty years, one of the most striking trends in this field has been the study of feminism among differently positioned women. For instance, Annelise Orleck developed the notion of “industrial feminism” among immigrant, wage-earning women in early twentieth-century New York and along the way demonstrated the significance of not only gender but also class and ethnicity to understanding the history of feminism; work by Dorothy Sue Cobble (1995; 2004), which argues that “labor feminism” emerged among working-class American women in the mid-twentieth century, does the same and shows moreover that organized working-class women were central to the emergence of the new mass movement for women’s advancement that erupted in the 1960s. Studies of poor African American women, analyzing intersections of gender, class, and race, have argued that activists in the National Welfare Rights Organization in the late 1960s and 1970s generated feminist analyses of their own social positions and must be conceived as part of the postwar feminist movement (Nadasen, 2004). Studies of Latina and Black feminism analyze the paths that moved differently positioned women towards feminist worldviews and the different priorities they, as feminists, then had (Nelson, 2003; Roth, 2003). Intersectionality has, thus, been a crucial analytical tool for understanding the history of feminism (and women) in the mid- to late-twentieth century.

ELLEN ROONEY

My brother’s sex was white. Mine, brown.
Cherríe Moraga, “A Long Line of Vendidas”

The critical impact of intersectionality as a critique of the monocausal discourses of both anti-sexist and anti-racist activism and thought that Kimberlè Crenshaw devastatingly exposed is on-going. Even many years after Crenshaw’s original formulation, it is difficult to conceive a dampening of its capacity to intervene in feminist arguments and organizing in the near future. The tendency, constantly reanimating itself, no matter how battered it may be, to lapse into essentialisms, to obscure not just difference, but conflict and antagonism, to overgeneralize, is endemic to identity politics. And identity politics will continue to reassert itself in

feminist discourse for so long as identities continue to be a means by which hegemonic powers divide, exploit, and (re)order the world. This is not to claim that the critique of identity politics is misplaced; it must press its (to me unassailable) case. But the resistance to hegemonic modes of working identity to “manage,” exploit, stereotype, and exclude, must risk identity politics just as gender studies risks becoming trapped in its (extra) disciplinary university cell. And, like gender studies, identity politics may enable an unprecedented destabilization of identity itself.

Crenshaw theorized these risks, contradictions, and opportunities, recognizing in them social contradictions not to be easily dissolved by a single discursive analysis or, for that matter, activist project; she pointedly invoked categories that would “expand” her concept in political and theoretical “transitions” to come. If the intersectional analysis she proposed was in her view “both provisional and illustrative” of the failures of contemporary critiques of racism and sexism, and so subject to being “replaced as our understanding of each category becomes more multidimensional,” her argument was also unambiguous in naming “a Black Feminist stance” as the perspective from which it emerged. Intersectionality’s force as a critique that reveals the structural blindnesses of the (self-consciously critical) analyses it addresses rests upon this explicit naming of its own perspective. This unapologetic gesture acknowledges that the reorientation intersectional analysis imposes will without fail produce its own blindness. The critical project is thus an interminable one, at least so long as identity formations remain a potent weapon of power.

However, as the forum question observes, intersectionality is celebrated as a signature, perhaps *the* definitive concept, of gender studies’ project and subject to criticisms. Some scholars object that intersectional analysis is aspirational, more invoked than undertaken, others that it paradoxically reinforces the centrality of the categories it hoped to qualify or displace, and some that it has never been properly extended as a mode of analysis to *all* subjects, dominated and dominant. These rereadings often seek to extend or deepen intersectional analysis, or to pair it with other concepts, as in Jasbir Puar’s work, which “put[s] intersectionality in tandem with assemblage to see how they might be thought together.” In feminist literary studies, the work of intersectional critique can seem curiously prefatory, clearing critical space for a reading that proceeds in other terms, terms we might read as a *translation*

of intersectional form. Chicana feminist theorist Cherríe Moraga's dense and provocative observation that her "brother's sex was white. Mine, brown" is a formulation that must surely be read into the prehistory of intersectional critique. Yet Moraga's figure paradoxically literalizes the racialization of sex (in its multitude of senses) and so moves beyond concepts of double jeopardy or layers of multiple oppressions. Her idiom renders sex in the absence of race unthinkable and presses on from there, compelling us to think betrayal and seduction, power and pleasure, in terms of the real simultaneity of race and sex so that "power no longer breaks down into neat little hierarchical categories, but becomes a series of starts and detours." This figure presents a stubborn question, one with no final answer, to which feminist literary analysis is keenly drawn. Moraga warns that "since the categories are not easy to arrive at, the enemy is not easy to name." Feminist literary studies departs from the protocols of intersectionality; detoured by uneasiness, it probes the difficulty of reading the proper name.

ELISABETTA VEZZOSI

According to Jennifer C. Nash (2008) intersectionality has become one of the main analytical instruments of feminist and anti-racist scholarship for theorizing identity and oppression. In reality the term embraces a wider range of possibilities because it allows us not only to subvert the race/gender binary formula and interpret identity and consciousness in multiple ways, but to go beyond the practice of "identity politics" by highlighting the existence of intra-group differences. Its importance has been reiterated on various occasions and the journal *Signs* (Summer 2013) dedicated a whole number to it – "Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory" – underlining how the category has become one of the most generative concepts within feminist and critical race theory. By connecting to the reality of multiple inequalities and embracing the dynamics of the multidimensionality of lived experiences among people, intersectionality acknowledges that human beings possess many distinctive social identity qualities which interplay in unique ways.

A number of scholars have suggested that a good application of intersectionality would combine quantitative and qualitative methods in

order to fully explore individuals' lives at macro and micro levels (see among others Dill and Zambrana, eds., 2009). For the most part, criticism of intersectionality is directed towards its lack of a definitive methodology, to its doubtful empiric validity and to the fact that – in its emphasis on black women's experiences of subjectivity and oppression – it has clouded an important question: is intersectionality a theory of multiply marginalized subjectivity or a generalized theory of identity? Vivian May (2012) has replied to this objection, claiming that “intersectionality offers a vision of future possibilities that can be more fully realized once a shift toward the multiple takes place” (165). Starting from the above considerations, is it really necessary to ask ourselves if it is possible to transform a concept that is strictly linked to a domination/subordination dynamics into a generative concept of possible empowerment positions? I am thinking, for example, of the political empowerment of welfare mothers in the Sixties and Seventies thanks to a national movement that was predominantly African American, and also to the role played by transnational organizations such as the International Council of Women of the Darker Races in the global anti-colonial movement.

In general, however, discussion on mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) research applications of intersectionality in women's and gender history is immature.

4. Transnationalism and/or global approach are two dominating trend of contemporary academic scholarship. What has been the contribution of women's and gender studies (in your specific field of research) toward transnationalism and/or global studies? And, how has transnationalism affected women's and gender scholarship in your field of research?

GIOVANNA COVI

Greatly. The articulation of a decolonialized transnational discourse is not even conceivable without the pioneering provisions, among many others, of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sylvia Wynter, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Trinh-Min-Ha, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Satya Mohanty, Michelle Cliff – and I am on purpose quoting poets with

theorists here because this is one of the fundamental boundaries that feminism has also questioned. If in the 1980s postcolonial theorists were still working under the assumption that they could ignore postcolonial feminist theorists, who on the contrary displayed a deep knowledge of masculinist philosophies, I believe that today it is simply no longer acceptable that any field of knowledge, including globalization and transnational studies, is articulated regardless of a gendered and queering perspective. Transnational perspectives necessarily embrace forms of interdisciplinary inquiry that address the changing conditions, but cannot forget the empowering legacy of the work on colonialism, modernity and globalization performed so far by feminist inquiry (Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan). It should be kept in mind that feminism is not pre-defined by any founding Book and it is for everybody (bell hooks) – it is an organic form of critical inquiry and action that seeks justice and even seeks a more material grounding for justice than mere language. For this reason, it always needs to redefine the concepts that make our communities more just. To conclude with a poetic embodiment of these theories, for example, I find in Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then* a strong argument for the urge to subvert definitions of family, love and kinship in order to undermine the colonial paradigm.

ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

The reciprocal influence of women and gender on transnational studies has been among the most enriching of intellectual experiences. It extended from the discovery among historians of gender that women had long learned from, and exchanged ideas across national borders. This has been especially true within the western hemisphere; but now we are also discovering that it might be equally the case in parts of Asia. Historians like Nancy Hewitt uncovered a network of abolitionists in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the second part of the nineteenth century, women's rights activists communicated with each other, influencing each other's thoughts, demands and practices. The work of the Australian historian Ian Tyrell has been important here. And Susan Kent, Susan Pedersen and others have written about the post World War I women who traveled widely to help shape the peace process, and who continued to meet together in small

groups and large conferences to try to avert a second war. Women's history has enabled the tracking of networks across national borders; it has opened new doors to comparative perspectives. I point to *Protecting Women* – a book comparing women-only labor legislation in a dozen different countries, and including the United States and Australia – where the authors, working together were able to explain the passage of such legislation everywhere. Did we imagine ourselves as historians of women, or as transnational historians? I don't know. I do know that much of the work I've been doing recently (with the Italian historian Maurizio Vaudagna) though it explicitly focuses on comparing changes in national policies in what we call "the two wests" has enabled a more nuanced understanding of families, and the rewards and penalties of male and female labor than could have been possible without a transnational perspective.

ROBYN MUNCY

Transnationalism has been a very important factor in U.S. women's/gender history. Even before the term "transnationalism" was coined, historians were demonstrating that gender ideals circulated around the Atlantic world in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whether it was true womanhood or New Womanhood, ideas about the nature of womanhood were not contained by national boundaries, and this fact was clear from the very start of women's history in the 1970s. Social settlements; arguments for women's suffrage; women's discussions of ways to achieve peaceful international relations; all of these were part of transnational social and political movements, and women's historians documented them as such before "transnationalism" emerged explicitly as a category in U.S. history. Similarly, histories of women's participation in creating welfare states often took the form of comparative histories in which the transnational circulation of ideas and people was also made clear before the term was much in use. Those studies showed both that ideas, policies, and institutions for responding to the dislocations caused by industrial capitalism were shared across national borders and that those shared ideas rarely had the same results in any two countries. They also helped to identify significant reasons for those different outcomes: varying

state capacities, birth rates, race relations, and immigration patterns, for instance. In the last 15 years or so, as the study of transnational flows of ideas and people, of capital and institutions have become more self-conscious, we have achieved, among other things, new understandings of how empires operated and what they meant (and mean) for women and vice versa. I'm thinking here of such works as Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne's edited volume (2008), which, though not specifically about American history has certainly shaped it.

One of many generative notions contributed by *Moving Subjects*, for instance, was that of "power-saturated [sites] of cultural conjuncture and context," a concept framing a recent essay by Lisa Chilton on a hospital in Quebec (2015). This essay explores the meanings of British imperialism for working-class migrants in French-Canadian areas in North America. Many studies in this newer era focus on the migration of women from one region to another with implications for both the place left behind and the place of destination. Catherine Choy's study of Filipino nurses who migrated to the U.S. demonstrated the importance of transnationalism for understanding not only the history of women's labor and imperial relations but also the history of medicine and disease (2003). An edited collection by Vicki Ruiz and John Chavez explored how region of origin shaped Latinas' politics and identities in the U.S. (2008). Jennifer Guglielmo's study of Italian women who migrated from Italy to the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century illuminated the ways that emerging industrial and national institutions in one place dramatically shaped families and labor regimes not only there but also in places where those changing institutions sent migrants. Guglielmo's study helped to explain labor politics and race relations as well as gender relations in the U.S. (2010).

To illustrate the currency of transnationalism in women's history, we have only to look at the most recent issue of the *Journal of Women's History*, which is devoted to transnational feminist attempts to reform marriage and families and the ways that "local inflections of transnational feminisms" undermined any "presumption of global sisterhood" (2016). Clearly, transnationalism is a vital approach in American women's/gender today.

ELLEN ROONEY

...it is my sense that translation is the most intimate act of reading, a prayer to be haunted.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translating into English"

In the U.S. context, the perspectives that transnational feminisms bring to bear on gender studies and feminist theory extend the critiques of African American and women of color feminists who have challenged white feminist hegemonies and generalizations both in literary scholarship and in feminist theory broadly. They thus complicate and enrich local intersectional critiques. At the same time, this work stresses the long histories of women's global resistance to misogyny, patriarchy, and masculinism, helping to correct the misperception that women of color – whether in the US or elsewhere in the world – arrive at feminism belatedly, to correct and "contribute" to an already in place white or Euro-feminist problematic. Transnational feminisms thus compose new histories and narratives of feminist thought and struggle. These narratives do not ignore the literary, of course; transnational feminist cultural studies has generated multiple revisions of curricula and canons, of concepts such as the novel and "women's writing," and of accounts of the readers, spectators, and fans of a genuinely global media culture. This rethinking of concepts and reordering of archives has transformed the substance of feminist literary research. At the same time, some scholars of literature have taken a certain distance from the transnational or, more precisely, from the celebratory postures it can engender. Cognate terms such as globalization and the planetary, world literature and post-coloniality, present alternatives that resonate with questions of literary tradition and form and the problem of reading, topics that have sometimes been marginalized in the more sociological and anthropological feminist approaches that powerfully engage with transnationalism as such. Post-coloniality also animates figures of neo-colonialism and anti-colonialism in a direct way that apparently descriptive terms such as global or transnational do not; feminist literary analysis, especially of modern and contemporary works, remains committed to the emphasis that these critical discourses put on antagonism and conflict.

The question of how to conceptualize the field of the literary beyond the nation – the literary as transnational – is a question of translation. The relentless dislocations and transformations that globalization showers upon the world can obscure the inescapable role that translation plays in its operations, even as the academic and popular demand for translation escalates. “Translation is as much a problem as a solution,” Gayatri Spivak has argued, but some discourses of transnationalism perpetuate the dream of frictionless translation, a common language, the perfect rendering of an original that crosses borders with the ease of capital in the age of financialization: the translation as universal equivalent. In contrast, Spivak insists that “translation is not just the stringing together of the most accurate synonyms by the most proximate syntax,” but a reading practice that succeeds only insofar as it acknowledges its failures, the “impossibility” of its necessary task, and the persistence, in the face of the most determined translator, of “particularly untranslatable words,” telling texts in which the “idiom is singular to the tongue. It will not go over.” Of course, translation is never permanently stymied; impossible but necessary, it is everywhere at work, not only in its literal sense of rendering one language as/into another, but in cultural borrowings, exchanges, confusions, and thefts of every kind, and in the intimate constitution of the gendered subject as well. The untranslatable is within the translated, a remainder that serves as a caution to the will to assimilate or appropriate, to render transparent, to spurn mediations. Should transnationalism ease the difficulty of sounding the name or induce the forgetting of the idiom, it will not help the feminist critic to read.

ELISABETTA VEZZOSI

In recent years, comparative as well as global, world, and transnational history has produced new ways of thinking. Popular subjects of this new scholarship include migrations (see among others Donna R. Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, 2002), race, social politics, consumerism, movements, colonialism and anti-colonialism, post-colonialism and postmodernism, international relations, human rights, development politics, political governance, gender dynamics in militarization, participation of women in supranational organizations, etc.

In the field of research on transnational black feminism very few studies reveal how early twentieth-century black militants of both genders fostered a transnational movement focusing on the issues of racial oppression, gender inequality, colonialism, class exploitation, and global supremacy (see, for example, Minkah Makalani, 2011).

In my research, which involves the anti-colonial movements of African American women and their leadership positions, I asked myself several critical questions: how did African American women use Pan-Africanism as a resource in their battle for racial progress and gender equality? What roles did these women play in the various Pan-African movements? To what extent could they hold leadership positions within these movements, at least during certain phases? Did these movements manage to create solid transnational female networks?

If it is true that history is the discipline that has made least use of intersectionality, certain life experiences provide an optimal field of study. My research deals with a detailed study of the activism and intellectual work of African American women such as Julia Cooper – who in her PhD dissertation examined the transatlantic dynamics of the Haitian and French revolutions – and Mary McLeod Bethune, who dedicated her entire life to the creation of a “black global community.” Both cases confirm the heuristic value of the interweaving of intersectional and transnational analyses by backdating the origins of this two categories by almost a century.

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