Gender History Across Epistemologies
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Gender History Across Epistemologies

EDITED BY
DONNA R. GABACCIA
AND
MARY JO MAYNES
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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
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. 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. 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. 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’. 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”’. 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. 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-à-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’.
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: ‘by 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’.

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’. 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’. 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’s letters 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’. 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”’. 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’. 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. 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*’.

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.

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’. 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
peripheral to the group’s effort to tackle and challenge racial and ethnic hierarchies and inequities.

Besides offering creative epistemological approaches to textual and visual sources, this special issue also highlights the extent to which, in the decades since gender history’s emergence, it has moved from being a largely western project to becoming a global project. Many of the articles here point strongly to the complexities of grappling with global geopolitical dimensions of ‘how we know what we know’, once again echoing the revisionism we can see in the Postcard (At the Golden Gate) 2009.

Within history, historiographical knowledge has tended to develop within frameworks designated by time (such as ‘ancient’ or ‘medieval’ or ‘modern’) and space (ranging from the scale of village micro-histories to world histories). Arguably, the nation-state has because of its ideological and institutional clout been a strong influence on the historiography of the modern world, but it is not the only such organising principle of historiography even if it is probably the most familiar one. Within national historiographies, particular research traditions, sources, languages and theoretical orientations have shaped what has been considered knowable about the past. Comparing across national or temporally-defined historiographies thus calls attention to each field’s peculiarities. The intellectual ferment characteristic of the late-imperial and postcolonial era has brought an explicit geopolitical critique to national historiographies, as well as to many other ways of knowing about the past. It has pushed historians to be more alert to the global geopolitical and extra-national influences on historical ways of knowing, even regarding such seemingly local, intimate or subjective arenas as gender relations or gender identity formation. This critique has been a defining element in some subfields, such as postcolonial African history. More recently it has begun to inform metropolitan historiographies as well.

It is noteworthy that we find relatively little evidence in these articles of projects defined by national historiographies of the traditional sort. To some extent this reflects the fact that many of the authors are not, by disciplinary training, historians; but even those authors who are trained as historians more often cross than respect historiographical boundaries. Lorelle Semley’s contribution presents an argument about ‘public mothering’ that explicitly calls attention to distinctive conceptualisations of gender and mothering that operate in western feminist theory and historiography as opposed to West African history and historiography. As a North American doing research in Africa she struggles to develop a gender analysis that does not force the lives of individual African women into categories developed by North American or European historians of gender or empire. To explore what she sees as distinctive ways of conceptualising relations between gender and power that do not presume a ‘public/private’ divide as conceptualised in the west, Semley must in turn defy geographically defined borders of investigation. Her article first takes up questions of African historiography through a conceptual lens developed in North America before again circling back to Africa and then returning to Semley’s North American classrooms.

For Nancy L. Green, focusing on migration, the transnational has also always been an important terrain of analysis. Her article poses the problem of the nation state in a way that highlights questions of epistemology through comparative historiography. Certainly she cites differences in national trends in migration, but closer to the heart of her claims are provocative comparisons about the questions upon which historians have focused in two different national-historiographic contexts and how these questions in
turn have structured understandings of the role of gender in migration history. To offer one example of her thinking along these lines, Green notes that ‘[a]s assumptions about assimilation (through the 1960s in the United States, through the 1970s in France) gave way to enquiries about ethnicity in the United States and the “droit à la différence” (the right to be different) in France, researchers asked few questions about the gendered meanings of those terms’. Concepts embedded in historiography, in other words, followed temporal shifts in nationally specific political debates. The place of gender in these historiographies also resonated at times with the transnational flow of ideas and at times with national-historiographic peculiarities. Comparative convergences and divergences of this sort call to our attention both general and nationally specific political projects that have shaped how we know what we know about migration history.

Modern nation states have – as Green notes – routinely tracked and counted mobile people, creating an archive from which historians in France and the United States are only now beginning to produce gendered knowledge (about states, labour markets, communities and individuals). Green’s discussion of feminist historians who work quantitatively with this archive suggests how empirically-oriented social historians attempt to come to terms with the binary of ‘male’ and ‘female’ which is constitutive of the data they use. Green suggests how we can know gender even when presented with fixed binaries, for example by paying attention to variations in the numbers of male and female migrants. To explain these variations one must explore the gendering of state policies, educational and family systems and labour markets in both sending and receiving societies. It is not, then, the sex of migrants that explains variations in their numbers relative to each other, but rather gender relations deduced in part from those numbers.

A significant cluster of essays in this collection point to paths scholars take as they attempt to escape the ‘gaze’ of nation-states, their archive-building bureaucracies and the national historiographies they have shaped. One provocative approach is to seek out or to construct archives that document the perspectives of border-crossers, including but not limited to the type of migration history that Green describes. Viewing gender history from the perspective of migrants and other travellers allows scholars to challenge the ‘nationality’ of their subjects, their analytic categories and their ideas, as well as to problematise their own relations to their research subjects. We would like to note three different types of ‘border crossing’ that come into focus in several of the articles: first, research projects that track the movements of historical actors across borders; second, research that brings the researchers themselves into cross-border relationships with research subjects and third, and closely related to the second, research situations that problematise the practice of carrying analytic concepts of gender across borders.

People who cross borders are complicated subjects of historical study. Nation-states have created most of the main categories through which their mobility has been documented historically. They have usually distinguished emigrants sharply from immigrants (categories that are important not only to Green but also, for example, to Moreton’s analysis of the letter-writing Lough sisters) as well as from refugees or exiles (including, for example, several of the Jewish scientists studied by Satzinger). For modern states, the categories of emigrants, immigrants and refugees/exiles are salient and consequential in their implications for biopolitical projects of nation building (with desirable immigrants viewed as potential additions and emigrants as potential losses to the ‘body politic’). As politically salient categories, border-crossers’ movements have,
in turn, been subject to state construction and scrutiny, creating massive archives which incorporate the gaze of the nation state.

On the other hand, upper-class ‘travellers’ – such as Barbara Bodichon, as analysed by Meritxell Simon-Martin – have not always been scrutinised by border police or documented in the same category as ‘migrants’. Yet they too crossed borders – not only national boundaries, but also the borders of metropole/colony, race and culture. By reflecting on the historical experiences of various types of travellers – including those who cycled repeatedly through the same places or those who left home again and again, only to return, sometimes multiple times – the epistemological and historiographical consequences of border crossing can be more fully explored. As historians examine gender history from the perspective of border crossing they begin to see how nation states, their archives and their historiographies render the mobile as interesting but also often threatening aberrations from an imagined and sedentary human ‘normalcy’.

Male mobility typically has provoked different official concerns than female mobility. Even more deeply, crossing political boundaries often entails crossing gender systems as well, thus calling attention to their instability, their cultural specificity and their malleability. Alertness to the ideological filters inherent in state archives documenting mobility is critical to using them to study gender; moreover, the use and sometimes even the scholarly assemblage of novel types of archives can produce knowledge that is less moulded by states, and that therefore sheds new light on the relationship between mobility and gender.

The usual categories deployed by the nation state – notably the distinction between the sedentary and the mobile, the emigrant and the immigrant – disappear almost entirely in Sonia Cancian’s analysis of letters exchanged between two lovers from north-eastern Italy, Loris Palma and Antonietta Petris. Both lovers moved over the course of their relationship and both were undoubtedly ‘counted’ by one set of authorities or another as emigrants and as immigrants, but these categories were not the operative ones for them. Both certainly felt consequences when one moved and the other remained temporarily in place. Their communication through an unfolding epistolary relationship (first, within Italy, and then across the ocean separating Canada and Italy) continually repositioned them metaphorically in time and space; in their communication with each other, they sometimes looked temporally forward (into the future) and sometimes temporally backwards (towards the past), sometimes (spatially) away from their current location and sometimes (spatially) towards it.

Letter writing mediated – or perhaps, as Cancian suggests, even constructed – their personal relationship, allowing each correspondent to experience their communication as a continuation or unfolding of their earlier, brief, face-to-face contacts. Cancian’s careful reading of the emotionally charged and, despite the distance, intimate world created through the letters demonstrates an epistemological paradox: the dynamic construction of gender ideologies apparent here is knowable only because of the mobility and separation of the two lovers. They wrote, as Cancian says, only when ‘intimate face-to-face conversations, and ordinary, world-making discourse were no longer possible’. Had their face-to-face relationship continued, in fact, their subjectivities, their use of language and the gendering of their communication about emotions, dreams, memories and imagined futures would have been subsequently knowable – if at all – only in a very different way, through retrospection, for example, as captured through oral histories. But, as Cancian’s analysis makes clear, neither the original relationship
nor the historian’s reconstruction of it would have been the same. If corpus linguistics, which Emma Moreton employs in her study of the Irish immigrant letter writers, is always ‘about making comparisons’, Cancian’s exploration of gendered intimacy and emotion is possible only because an implied comparison (in this case with the face-to-face relationships of sedentary people who need no letters in order to construct meaning and intimacy) is impossible. As Cancian’s work suggests, border crossings and the separation of persons involved in intimate relationships that they sometimes demand offer particularly fruitful sites for seeing the dynamics of gender relations; intimacy across separation sets the context for putting thoughts down on paper that otherwise would not have taken this more permanent form. Moreover, border-crossers inevitably confront multiple ideologies of gender, thus pushing them to ‘see’ gender more explicitly than they might have, had they stayed home, and challenging a prior understanding of sex or gender that might have just seemed ‘natural’.

In Jamie McDaniel’s analysis of Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, border crossing plays a central, if metaphoric, role. The article focuses on a well-known feminist classic’s main character, who crossed borders of time, gender and sex. Read in juxtaposition with Stanley and Dampier, Green or Cancian, McDaniel’s article reveals how border crossings facilitated Orlando’s adoption of a new epistemology of property and propriety. Writing as a literary scholar, McDaniel calls attention to his decision to reconsider what he considers ‘the value that literary scholarship places on a kind of critical detachment from its objects of inquiry’. Rejecting that stance, McDaniel views Virginia Woolf’s extensively analysed text through immersion in the epistemologies that Woolf herself mobilised in writing Orlando. McDaniel calls his choice ‘epistemological doubling’. By epistemological doubling, McDaniel intends more than the mere blending or juxtaposition of differing ways of knowing; here, epistemological doubling means self-consciously adopting and mimicking the ways of knowing adopted by Woolf herself — e.g. literary analysis, a gendered legal history of property and biographies of both an individual (Orlando) and the British nation.

In adopting multiple and shifting epistemological stances, McDaniel becomes a biographer of Woolf – one who can see linkages among Woolf’s personal biography, her intellectual positions and British national history more broadly. Woolf’s engagement with the writer Vita Sackville-West’s loss of her house and lands and her corresponding interest in women’s property rights (which were under debate at the time she wrote) interact with Orlando’s biography and developing thoughts about property as the fictional character lives and travels with the ‘gipsies’. In adopting Woolf’s ‘preoccupation with looking back’ through time, through Orlando’s long and complex biography and through the history of property relations, McDaniel is able to ‘revisit narratives of national and gender identity’ — narratives that excluded women and the propertyless — and to redefine what marked Woolf and Orlando as British women. Orlando itself becomes a work of fiction that tells a history of the British nation and not just a biography of its main character. Woolf’s most important work of fiction tells this story in a way that reveals Woolf’s dawning realisation that women’s writings themselves constitute valuable property, and once again, we note, calling attention to words as actions.

Olive Schreiner also moved across borders — both those between the colony of South Africa and the metropole and those defined by race and gender within South Africa. As a border crosser privileged by reason of her race and status as a writer, Schreiner was able to ‘translate’ developments in colonial South Africa for British
citizens in the metropole. But she could do this so effectively, Stanley and Dampier suggest, in part because she had left South Africa to live in Britain and had then experienced the shock of viewing her own society – ‘the slow pace of life in the white enclave and the narrowness of white people’s lives and opinions’, a nation of ‘Philistines’ – from new perspectives as an outsider after her return from Britain.26 Conversely, her fame in the metropole gave her credibility in the colony that would otherwise have been unlikely.

Crossing borders in the research process can also have profound epistemological implications. Sometimes this can result from as common a practice as translation. For example, historian of science Helga Satzinger points to the challenge of translation across languages most forcefully when she writes about the problematic use in the English language of the term ‘gender’ when writing the history of biological sex difference in Germany. Satzinger notes that ‘in the German-language “Geschlechterforschung” (gender studies) there is no need for the explicit sex-gender distinction in order to indicate the realm of socially-constructed “gender”’.27 As a native-speaker of German, Satzinger is able not only to see how the term ‘gender’ carries a distinctive relationship to biological sex difference in English and in German, she is able to mobilise the linguistic difference between German and English languages in order to probe the history of scientific research on gender and sex at the turn of the twentieth century. The problem that Satzinger points to – that is, the particularity of the sex/gender distinction as it has come to operate in English is not just a problem for German speakers but indeed for speakers of a large number of languages. Furthermore, precisely because the meaning and resonance of the word ‘gender’ differs across languages, gender history itself has, at times, become associated with historical practice in the Anglo-American scholarly world, and resisted as such elsewhere, another very important reminder of the power of words and the geopolitical dimensions of border crossing.

Border crossing also raises the important issue of when and how the scholar’s relationship to his or her subject shapes the knowledge created. Whether or not insider and outsider researchers produce distinctive knowledges is an issue that has long engaged researchers who study colonised peoples, migrants and racial minorities, where it has been understood both as defining the politics (and identity politics) implicit in scholarship and as a very broad epistemological question. Shirin Saeidi reports that the informants she interviewed for her study of the lives of non-elite Iranians during the Iraq/Iran war of the 1980s expected her to cultivate an emotional understanding of them in order to bridge the gap between her assumptions and categories of analysis and their ways of narrating their own memories of life in war-torn Iran. Her informants’ sharp emotional reactions to some of her questions and observations revealed her ‘unconscious perspectives, as respondents demanded recognition of their emotional positionality towards me’. Her border crossing into Iran and other places where Iranians lived in exile, and also into the personal realm of her interviewees’ lives, challenged the analytic categories she took with her to the field. ‘I became accustomed to continually moving’, she writes, ‘between people, feelings, claims and ideas during interviews and archival work until the specific complexities at issue became apparent—not depictions of gender and sexual categories as I understood them through my own history, solidarities and education’.28 Although Cancian does not explicitly address this issue in her essay, she also describes a research process in which she is both an insider and an outsider to the Italian migrant letter writers who are the object of her
investigation. Cancian’s endnotes indicate how crucial her relationship to the female letter writer, Antonietta Petris, has been to the development of this scholarly project. As a tri-lingual Canadian of recent Italian origin, living in Montreal, Cancian can claim status as an insider but is simultaneously someone who through her education has travelled outside that community, only to return to it as a researcher. This process was critical to Cancian’s acquiring access to the letters and even to her ability to read and understand them – distinguishing, for example, standard Italian from the dialects of north-eastern Italy. Without establishing a personal and ongoing trusting relationship with Petris, Cancian could not have made visible to others the struggles over gender and intimacy between the two young, letter writing lovers of the post-war period.

Scholars who venture across borders carry with them their own ideas of gender. Essays focused on Iran, India, Malawi and Benin all raise questions about how well concepts of gender and methods of gender analysis travel. ‘North-South’ border crossings are particularly charged in a postcolonial context where the hierarchically organised global systems of power of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries still live on in contemporary ways of knowing. As already noted, Shirin Saeidi documents her rethinking of concepts of gender she carried into the field. Christopher Lee’s investigation led him to doubt the utility of the usual categories of social historical and gender analysis in his efforts to make sense of an incident he discovered in the National Archives of Malawi. Working from an archived text from the early twentieth century, Lee’s close reading of the violent conflict documented within it between an unidentified European man and an African woman called Adaima, while seemingly highly idiosyncratic, nevertheless allowed him to see with vivid clarity the personal experiences of inter-racial sexual relations that often occurred under colonial rule. At the same time, western (or northern) analytic categories, including gender, possess limitations for explaining the meaning or significance of Adaima’s violent outbursts. They do not reveal her motivations nor, as Lee argues, should her experience be read as representative of the lives of other women. The European man’s fear of Adaima and his recourse to colonial authorities also remain somewhat puzzling. What is the gendering of power revealed in this idiosyncratic story? In short, the ‘vast cultural and epistemological gaps’ that Severy-Hoven sees separating modern western readers from ancient Pompeii also continue to complicate conversations across modern geopolitical and cultural borders as well. At present, satisfactory ‘translation’ across the north/south divide remains elusive.

The essays by Stanley and Dampier on the writer Olive Schreiner and by Lorelle Semley on the seemingly enigmatic West African women, Alaba Ida and Yá Shègèn, reveal a somewhat different cluster of epistemological challenges raised by the global mobility of a key, if much debated, concept of European and American gender ideology – the notion of ‘separate spheres’ or the division between public and private. Stanley and Dampier note the paradox of separate spheres in a South African setting: the narrow ‘private sphere’ within which middle-class white women in South Africa believed themselves to be confined could scarcely have existed without the constant entries and exits of black South African service workers. Schreiner’s ‘political letters’ constituted a breach of the boundary that supposedly excluded women such as herself from political activity; indeed, much of Stanley and Dampier’s essay focuses on the possibility of knowing from existing sources whether or not (and how) her ‘exhortatory’ letters influenced the political decisions and behaviour of her brother and several other men in power to whom she ‘expressed her views’ and ‘left them to work’. As they conclude,
the result is an ‘alternate history of a momentous period in the South African past’, one in which the female, Olive Schreiner, comes into focus as ‘a shrewd and effective political strategist’ but also one for whom the binary of public and private loses much of its power to organise our ways of knowing about the past.30

The conceptual framework of separate spheres is the same in both articles, but it still remains difficult to imagine the ‘public mothers’ explored by Lorelle Semley in her account of influential African women under French colonial rule as falling within the same category of boundary-breaching female political strategists to which Stanley and Dampier assign Schreiner. Semley explores a complex genealogy for ‘public motherhood’ – an understanding that mothers can and should in particular circumstances exercise legitimate societal power, which connects contested African practices to political theorisation by African American and white European and American feminists. Semley’s portrait of the African public/private divide and the space for public motherhood is a complex and critical one, however. She notes how differently African and western scholars interpret the collective action of a group of elderly women who, during the 1929 ‘Women’s War’, exposed their naked bodies in order to shame and challenge local African leaders. But at the same time, the fate of the two ‘public mothers’ that Semley discusses in some detail – Alaba Ida and Yá Shègèn (Akanké Òwebeyi Aduké) – points toward the limits of West African maternalism and not toward celebration of a distinctively African model of ‘othermother’. Semley suggests that Alaba Ida and Yá Shègèn lived in an African society and culture that also constrained how mothers could exercise public authority and power; those limits were not only impositions of the French colonial state, although in the stories of both women they were thoroughly entwined in France’s exercise of colonial power in the region. Rather than posing these female figures as alternatives to those models possible within a western ideology of separate spheres, then, Semley asks whether scholars should instead consider a different and more radical perspective of ‘black women and public mothers as modern, and, dare one say, universal?’31

Aniruddha Dutta’s investigation of gender/sexual identity formation in eastern India also raises questions about the relationship between ‘indigenous’ categories and those imported through transnational scholarship. He starts by questioning categories of gender/sexual identity, in particular the often-articulated contrast between a historically grounded category of transgender identity – the hijra – with the more recently emergent (politically activist and thus supposedly less ‘authentic’) transgender identity – kothi. Dutta poses the history he recounts in explicitly epistemological terms. His analysis tracks the British colonial categorisation of the hijras in the context of attempts to ‘describe, classify and control’ them in a manner similar to colonial authorities’ controlling classifications of other practices such as ‘widow-burning’ and ‘child marriage’ in the service of justifying imperialist rule. Even though postcolonial anthropology has overturned these colonial views, the categories still trouble western epistemologies: the hijra has functioned as a quintessential marker of Indic gender/sexual difference. As colonial depictions were superseded in the twentieth century, the hijra was reclaimed as a prominent non-western “third gender” or transgender group resisting the western schema of sexual dimorphism.32 Using ethnography and interviews to supplement the written record, Dutta argues against seeing the hijra as a single, persistent and monolithic category; he terms the hijra as ‘an active epistemological project’ rather than one rooted in an unchanging past. In this respect, hijra have more
in common with *kothi* than is usually recognised. Dutta, in effect, historicises the *kothi* to point to similarities between the two groups: ‘both the *hijra* and the *kothi* . . . emerge as (seemingly) coherent identities through the collusion of multiple subcultural and governmental processes’. \(^{33}\) In order to see these identities in a new light, Dutta calls for and demonstrates an epistemology that can bridge various sites and methods of inquiry, ranging from the colonial archive to ethnographies of kinship, the politics of non-governmental organisations and contemporary media analyses.

As Dutta’s analysis makes clear, the archive remains central to almost all ways of knowing and different types of archives and different understandings of ‘the archive’ offer different perspectives on the past. That relationships of power constitute every archive, that they create archival silences and that they necessitate new methodologies for interpreting the silences, constituted, for historians, some of the most important insights of the post-structural philosophers. In the words of Deborah Cherry archives are ‘shaped in and by historically specific relations between power and knowledge which have determined who is recorded, when, where and how’. \(^{34}\) In the case of the Schreiner epistolarium, and other studies of letter writers, we see additional sources of silence that are less the direct product of unequal power relations than of the ways in which communication is mediated. Because Schreiner more frequently met face-to-face with her political allies in the feminist and nascent multi-racial human rights movements of South Africa, she produced an archive where scholars can better see and know her strategies for educating those who disagreed with her than they can know and see the political dynamics of her collaborations and alliances.

Christopher Lee directly and creatively addresses the issue of archival silences as he seeks to understand and to translate the meaning of the violent (and apparently threatening) behaviour of the woman Adaima and the father of her child, whose complaint survives – however oddly situated – in the colonial archive. According to Lee, the archive within which Adaima’s story is embedded makes its meaning elusive, just as the concepts and language structuring the colonial archive ‘shape our conditions of knowledge and analysis of the past’. But while Lee acknowledges that the archival placement of this document would make it ‘easy to pass over this archived story, to consider it exceptional and therefore disregard it’, he asserts that the document reflects not the perspective of the colonial state alone but also (in Antoinette Burton’s terms) ‘fugitive traces of historical subjectivity’. Lee makes a powerful argument for attending to such archival remnants of marginal lives, however fragmentary, and the ‘idiosyncrasies of individual experience’, more generally. Must this individual’s life be ‘scaled up to represent a form of group politics’, he asks pointedly, before it acquires meaning? \(^{35}\) Or are there other understandings of gender that emerge only through systematic analysis of large numbers of cases, as Emma Moreton’s analysis of gendered language illustrates?

Historians have also always been involved in the creation of archives as part of their research, raising issues concerning what about the past can be knowable and how it can be known. For example, the archive of letters created by Professor Kerby Miller and utilised by Emma Moreton for her research was photocopied and then transcribed (and used for traditional publications in some cases) long before it was digitised in order to facilitate the software-enhanced quantitative methods of corpus linguistics. Sonia Cancian digitised rather than photocopied the letters she collected but
has not attempted the type of analysis (illustrated by Moreton’s article) that digitisation facilitates. Neither have the scholarly creators of the ‘Olive Schreiner Epistolarium’, directed by Liz Stanley; for them digitisation was merely a convenient mechanism for compiling and linking the thousands of letters which Schreiner, in the course of her transnational life and political work, scattered across the private collections (of recipients) and archives in several nations. The essence of their archive building entailed the global search for and compilation of the scattered letters so as to make the epistolarium fuller, if still by nature partial. All these examples call attention to how archives raise epistemological issues, including that of the scholar as curator and archivist. Which ‘new’ archives attract the financial and temporal resources required for their collection and maintenance? If scholars are unable to ‘curate’ the archives they create over the long term, do they arguably create new silences, or – to use another metaphor – render their archives and their perspectival sources as invisible to future scholars as Adaima is in the context of colonial Malawi? While gender historians have excelled in revealing how gendered relations of power in the creation of archives can render powerless people invisible and silent, we now need to attend to the possibility that scholarly curation of emergent archives may also be a gendered process that will shape future knowledge production.

The letters analysed by Cancian raise a further question about archival dimensions of epistemology, since these letters have been preserved and curated privately, and only Cancian’s carefully cultivated relationship to the family curators of the letters ‘opens them’ and their perspectival knowledge to the view of public scholarship. Here, in the world of archives, preservation and access, we see replicated the kinds of ‘separate spheres’ explored in so many of the essays collected in this special issue. Because the transnational social field and intimate private world created in these letters ‘made meaning’ for the letter writers, and because that meaning has to some degree been passed on orally and emotionally to the descendants of the letter writers, the letters survive as a kind of family archive or ‘shrine’ to memory and family history. No scholar curator, and even no archive (such as the University of Minnesota’s Immigration History Research Center, which digitises such letters in the hopes of generating publicly accessible knowledge through them), can promise private or family curators that scholars will produce the same meaning or knowledge from the letters that the family may hope to preserve and even to control. These issues do not differ too significantly from those raised by the creation of significant scholarly collections of interviews and oral histories: for example, those created and used by Saeidi in her work on war-torn Iran in the 1980s. Ownership of and access to ‘private archives’ shapes the kind of knowledge that scholars committed to publication (i.e. making public) can create from them. In this context, even the willingness of scholars to accommodate and respond to private, familial or community concerns – for example about the use of private letters – may be gendered and certainly has special implications for historians of gender.

The joining of scattered and diverse archives – which, as Simon-Martin reminds us, is especially typical of the practices of biographers and historians of individual lives – points toward the mixed methodologies and multi-sited (transnational or multi-national) research that is increasingly characteristic of the human, social and natural sciences in our own times. Indeed, it is the kind of knowledge that can be created from diverse archives and from eclectic methodologies that seems most characteristic of the essays collected here. While it is possible to think of the use by historians
of photographs (Heller), works of art (Simon-Martin and Severy-Hoven), interviews (Dutta and Saeidi), letters (Stanley and Dampier, Cancian, Simon-Martin and Moreton), fiction (McDaniel) and ‘things’ (Benninghaus) as characteristic mainly of ‘interdisciplinary’ or ‘mixed methodologies’, we follow Simon-Martin in believing these sources raise some of the same questions about the production of knowledge as traditional archives, with their silences. As Simon-Martin observes, ‘[e]ach of these types of primary source is a genre, with its own regulatory codes and conditions of production that determine the perspectival information conveyed’. Each type of source, each archive, is thus mediated in ways that scholars can acknowledge, while creating knowledge from multiple perspectives rather than reading single archives and their silences. Variations within a single genre – different sets of works on letters, for example – reveal how they were produced, preserved (or not), and redeployed by people other than their original recipients. Thinking of various types of archive and the sources they preserve in terms of their qualities as ‘genres’ and what they contain, disclose or hide, calls our attention back to the large problem of what is knowable about gender in the past.

In nearly all of these articles, there is attention to the ongoing and active process of subject construction that produces and is produced by categories and sources. There are individuals in virtually all of these papers – individuals who are mysterious and knowable in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. The papers are filled with biographies or partial biographies, life-story interviews, correspondences whose exchanges disclose authors who, in the course of the analysis, often become more recognisable as persons.

The better-documented lives (for example, Olive Schreiner’s or Barbara Bodichon’s) yield more clues for the gender historian. But even these do not lead to preordained interpretations or completely coherent subjects who, as one might expect from older models of biography, act straightforwardly as agents in their own lives and those of others, with aims and consequences knowable to the historian. Simon-Martin, writing about Bodichon, distances herself from such a claim: ‘I argue that we do not have direct information about how Bodichon “lived” as a female artist’. Similarly, the German scientists and doctors whom Helga Satzinger and Christina Benninghaus investigate, even as they emerge as individuals with distinctive political and scientific agendas, are as much products of their labs and their milieus as they are their creators.

Even in the cases of more obscure and less well-documented lives, we can see the ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social, the never definitive process of self-construction that takes various forms, unevenly recorded. According to Cancian, letter writing created an opportunity and a need for a person ‘to construct, articulate and deliberate their knowledge of the world’. But in so doing, the correspondence she analyses demonstrates they were also constructing central elements of their own identities. Sometimes these new elements of identity emerged through criticism of gendered expectations they felt had been imposed on them. ‘To write and exchange intimate letters usually permitted correspondents to seek solace and “spiritual communion” in a separate space in which the outside world was excluded... the writers exchanged letters indicating they were each other’s intimate confidents – the only persons [they inferred] with whom they shared a world that was separate from the one they shared with others’. 


Subjects on the margins of literate cultures or archival projects remain more elusive. Semley’s ‘public mothers’ come across as fascinating, but not-quite-knowable. Part of Christopher Lee’s fascination with Adaima’s case was its anomalous character, that it went against the grain of his categorical expectations: ‘I realised that what was holding me back was not the content of the document, which remained invaluable, but established techniques of social history that emphasised common patterns of experience through aggregate data, the collection of multiple life histories, and, in sum, the privileging of groups over individuals’. Here, this social historian’s will to see history from below combines with awareness of how any individual story resists mere categorisation. So Lee presents an analysis that ‘position[s] Adaima’s story somewhere between the genres of biography and social history, since it speaks to broader patterns of historical experience as well as the unique significance of individual lives’. The surprisingly large number of individuals whose stories, or partial stories, emerge in the articles in this issue attest to historians’ ongoing concern with ‘broader patterns of historical experience as well as the unique significance of individual lives’. Many of the insights about gender history that this issue yields derive from research that focuses precisely on the points of intersection between identifiable individual projects of self-construction and the social networks, cultural forms and political systems that inform them.

Notes

1. At the Minnesota Workshop on ‘Gender History across Epistemologies’ where many of the papers published here were first presented, Meritxell Simon-Martin provided a useful discussion of some of the epistemological debates summarised here. Her discussion was very helpful to us as we wrote our introduction.


