Introduction
Writing feminist history: theoretical debates and critical practices

SUE MORGAN

The unresolved question of whether ‘women’ is a singular or radically diverse category, whether ‘women’ is a social category that pre-exists or is produced by history, is at the heart of both feminist history and the history of feminism.

Joan Scott, Feminism and History, 1996

The writing of history is not only not a transparent affair. It is not innocent either.


In 1976 Joan Kelly-Gadol announced enthusiastically that ‘women’s history has revitalised theory, for it has shaken the conceptual foundations of historical study.’ Her article identified three main historical approaches - periodisation, social analysis and theories of social change - upon which feminist scholarship was likely to have the greatest methodological impact. Thirty years later, the prodigious growth of feminist history alongside its counterparts, women’s and gender studies, has more than vindicated such predictions of its transformative potential. The recovery of women as subjects of, and agents in, the making of history, and the simultaneous decentering of the male subject has prompted widespread re-examinations of the most fundamental of historical presumptions, not least through vastly democratising the vision of who and what constitutes historical discourse. As Joan Scott has recently cautioned, however, ‘the achievement is not perfect’ for women are not yet ‘fully equal players’ in a profession where the extent of institutional and academic acceptance of feminist discourse still varies dramatically. Nevertheless, if feminists have not rewritten all of history, they have successfully...
gender and religion) and, in part, to the predominance of western anglophone feminist scholarship in driving forward many of the early debates that governed the development of the field. I hope, however, that the critique of western feminism's colonisation of the discourse (a major theme which occurs in several of the readings) and the references to comparative national perspectives wherever possible throughout the volume or in some way to indicating the thoroughly international discourse that feminist history has now become.

Because the term 'theory' is used so frequently in the Reader it might help to clarify, briefly, just what I understand by this term and its significance for feminist (and indeed all) history. In offering a commentary in the ways in which feminists have sought to theorise women's pasts, The Feminist History Reader is itself, unadvisedly, the product of a particular historical moment. That moment is one in which Himani Banerji's observation quoted at the beginning of this Introduction — that the writing of history is neither innocent nor transparent — is more widely acknowledged than ever before. Twenty-plus years on from the first 'shockwaves' of poststructuralism, it is no longer possible to speak of the 'unmediated, unconstructed, non-perspectival account of the past'. With impartiality and objectivity successfully demystified, writing history has become recognised as a 'situated practice', by which I mean a self-aware reconstruction of the past circumscribed by the subject position, theoretical intent and historical/ political context of the writer. Foregrounding the role of the historian as author is the way in which this Reader does not presuppose a distinction between the past (the totality of humanity's previous experiences) and history (the story or narrative ordering of that past). The past does not present itself to us in a ready-made narrative form complete with explanations for social change. Thus, in order to give shape and meaning to the always incomplete record of the past, historians, including feminists, must historicise it — in other words they must re-present the past in the form of a narrative 'historical discourse' which is never itself free.

All history-writing is therefore historically, theoretically because it cannot escape being artificially organised; formulated through particular intellectual explanatory frameworks or epistemologies (theorians of knowledge). If all history is thus inescapably theorised, then feminist history is no in particular and distinctive ways, for, as we shall see, feminism has been instrumental in exposing the gendered politics of knowledge production in history from the research phase through to the writing process.

I make these by now somewhat over-familiar statements about the unavoidability of theory in history because of what Catherine Hall has rightly referred to as the 'impenetrable resistance within the discipline to thinking theoretically.' Theory is ubiquitous, yet all too often it is simply identified by historians, including feminists, with the development of postmodernism or 'the linguistic turn'. As a result, theory is posited as a sort of optional layer on top of the solid base of 'proper' archival, empirical research. This empiricism/ theory binary badly needs disassembling. Not only is empiricism itself a theory but, as Ann-Louise Shapiro has argued, because 'history is both a form of cognition and a form of writing, historians cannot afford to absolve themselves from these debates.' I probably use the term 'theory' in this Reader in a broader (some would say less rigorous)
sense than many might find acceptable or convincing, but my point, following Shapiro, is this: if feminist historians are to recover a leading role in producing even more wide-reaching strategies for change, they cannot afford to lose their theoretical edge.  

That feminists have never united around a single theoretical position or methodological framework is evident from the multiplicity of positions that continue to disturb and enrich the field, many of which—socialist, Marxist, black, radical, liberal, lesbian, poststructuralist and postcolonial—are represented in this volume. In fact, such is the emphasis of this Reader upon theoretical controversy and conflict as it outlines attempts to dislodge gender as the primary cause of women’s oppression and to undercut the coherence of feminist identity itself, that readers might be tempted to ask why retain the term ‘feminist’ in the title at all? But, as every student knows, disagreement is the sine qua non of the academic profession. Such an absence of feminist unanimity is therefore neither a cause for concern nor for the dismissal of the integrity of the discourse itself. Rather, the constant stance of self-critique and the destabilising of the familiar that is so characteristic is of feminist critical practice is, to my mind, a source of tremendous creativity, optimism and analytical momentum. If a single common purpose were to be identified among such diverse approaches it would be, as Scott’s quote suggests at the beginning of this Introduction, the inscribing and re-inscribing of what is meant by the term ‘women’ Who is included or excluded in this category as the legitimate subject of feminist history? And what impact does this have upon the theoretical and political agenda of academic feminism? These are key questions that the readings in this volume seek to address.

Given that this Reader argues throughout for the heterogeneity of feminist historical discourse, it is also worth noting at the outset the important theoretical and methodological distinctions that have been made between women’s, feminist and women’s history. As Joan Rose has commented, these approaches overlap yet are by no means identical.² In a useful, clearly positioned discussion of these distinctions, June Purvis similarly recognises that while the links between women’s and feminist history are strong they are not interchangeable terms. ‘Whereas women’s history is defined by its subject matter and need not evoke a feminist perspective at all, feminist history is defined by the very specificity of its theoretical agenda.’¹ Gender history, the most recent approach undertaken by feminists, has shifted the debate away from a focus upon women to an examination of the interdependence and relational nature of female and male identities. The tendency has been to present these three approaches in terms of a progressivist narrative of the displacement of women’s and feminist history by gender history. I would argue instead that they continue to co-exist alongside each other in a mutually productive way; indeed, it is at the various points of intersection and overlap between them that much theoretical controversy and innovation has taken place. For this reason each of these approaches is represented in this Reader under the general rubric of ‘Feminist history’.

A practical point with which to conclude these preliminary observations. The remainder of this Introduction provides a synopsis of the main historiographical shifts and theoretical directions in feminist history during the past thirty-five years.

This has been organised as a guide to the four-part structure of the readings themselves and follows exactly the same headings and debates. This structure has been adopted in the hope that readers will find it a helpful way to familiarise themselves with an overview of the main issues, many of which are quite complex, before turning to the actual excerpts.

Part I: Bringing the female subject into view

our new understanding of the sexual division of labour, the organization of the family and the power relations between men and women meant that society could be transformed, that the world could be turned upside down by our new view of it.

Catherine Hall, ‘Feminism and Feminist History’, 1992

What it meant to be a woman and how best that category might be represented historically was played out in numerous debates during the 1970s and 1980s. Early feminist historiographies of the meanings of sexual difference were immensely varied, and theories surrounding the nature and purpose of feminist history vigorously contested. In Part I, I examine a selected number of major controversies orientated around theories of ‘patriarchy’, ‘separate spheres’, ‘women’s culture’ and ‘gender’, and the formative influence these discussions had on the initial theoretical trajectory of feminist history. These debates took place primarily, although not exclusively, within Anglo-American scholarship and were generated by the desire for a cohesive approach to women’s historical experience. In order to produce women as subjects capable of historical agency, the consolidation of a recognisable women’s identity was held to be paramount at this point although, as we shall see in subsequent sections, this was quickly opened up to successive challenges.

The development of feminist historical discourse from its dual parentage of the new social history and second wave feminism has been well documented, but it is worth reminding ourselves here of its overtly political and non-academic origins. Amidst a crucible of global social and political protest movements organised during the late twentieth century around a multiplicity of demands for equal opportunities, civil liberties and minority rights, the women’s movement provided the radicalising spirit for feminist historians. Women’s groups and adult education centres were important extra-academic sites for the initial exchanges of ideas in many countries and a heady anticipation of the revolutionary potential of feminist theory was evident, as suggested by Catherine Hall’s comment quoted above.¹² Catalysed by a growth in women’s history courses and the simultaneous emergence of numerous professional associations, feminist history developed a steady academic presence during this period, albeit very unevenly. As the editors of Writing Women’s History: International Perspectives (1993) illustrate in their introduction to a seminal collection of essays from twenty-two countries, feminist history was an international phenomenon from its very outset. At the same time, however, its development along multiple and contradictory pathways was often nationally determined by ‘local’ and thus different ‘historiographical contexts and institutional infrastructures’ ³⁶
Two contrasting examples of the development of feminist historiography can be seen with reference to France and Britain. As Cécile Dauphin and the authors of the essay 'Women's Culture and Women's Power' made clear, the influence of cultural anthropology and etiology, the history of mentalities and the impact of the Annales school were particularly significant for women's history in France, factors reflected in the preference for cultural themes such as women's sexuality, the body and motherhood. In contrast, 'British feminist history was fed and watered by the tradition of British Marxist historiography'.

Thompson's classic exposition of the cultural formation and agency of the English working classes upon the work of British socialist feminists, leading to a central preoccupation with class struggle and gender.

The question of patriarchy

It was the concept of 'patriarchy', however, that provided feminists with their first all-encompassing theory through which to identify the distinctive, gender-related forms of female subordination by men. Patriarchy may be defined, at its simplest, as 'a system of interrelated social structures through which men exploit women'. Feminist analyses of male power took several different emphases, from social and economic forms of exploitation to male sexual violence. Despite its widespread usage the term has proved persistently controversial, criticised for encouraging a monocular theory of women's condition. In an early exchange between three British feminist historians in 1979, Sheila Rowbotham expressed disquiet with the ahistorical presentation of patriarchy as the single determining cause of female subordination. Not only did this suggest a permanent oppositional antagonism between the sexes that left little analytical room for more positive, supportive male/female encounters but, Rowbotham argued, it also 'allowed' no space for the complexities of women's defiance. 

Rowbotham et al., Reading 3. Several years later, Joan Scott similarly warned against the inadequacies of any feminist meta-analysis grounded in intellectual difference: 'A theory that rests on the single variable of physical difference poses problems for historians', she argued, for 'it assumes a consistent or inherent meaning for the human body — outside social or cultural construction — and thus the ahistoricity of gender itself' (Scott, Reading 7). In response to Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor's defence of patriarchy was, in fact, a defence of theory. Feminist history, they contended, needed a distinctive theoretical framework through which to examine women's lives not least because 'history only asks questions which are put'.

Rowbotham et al., Reading 1. Ten years later, Judith Bennett's call to arms for a restoration of feminist history's 'political nerve' propelled a fully historicised understanding of patriarchy as feminism's central theoretical problematic. Especially innovative was her departure from the 'male oppressor/female victim' binary suggesting, radically, that women themselves were part of the diverse historical operations of patriarchy: 'Women have not been merely passive victims of patriarchy; they have also colluded in, undermined and survived patriarchy' (Bennett, Reading 2).

Further nuanced explorations of patriarchy have been prompted by gender historians working on the history of masculinity. In their Introduction to Manly Americans: Masculinities in Britain since 1820 (1991) Michael Roper and John Tosh provided what they thought were one of the best assessments of the 'middle ground' to be found between histories of masculinity and feminist analyses of patriarchy. The former need not be 'necessarily ungenial to feminism', Roper and Tosh argue, because to understand women's position now or in the past requires not only an engagement with the experience of the oppressed, but an insight into the structures of domination. This, analysing the historical dynamics of male power should further feminist understandings of why men fought to control and exploit women.

Whether or not patriarchy is the very life-blood of feminist history-writing, a useful theoretical shorthand for the multiple historical dynamics of female oppression or an overly ahistorical and essentialised account of female subjugation, remains unanswered at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is clear, however, that if patriarchal theory is to be meaningfully revitalised it will need to include within it an exploration of the changing social relations between women and men as well as a more effective way to account for historical discontinuities.

The separate spheres and 'women's culture'

An alternative analysis of patriarchy much in evidence throughout the 1970s and 1980s was based upon the metaphor of 'separate spheres', whereby feminist historians mapped the restrictions placed upon eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's lives in accordance with ideological prescriptions concerning the gendering of private and public space. The 'separate spheres' argument would go on to become one of the most dominant organising tropes of European and American women's history for thirty years or more. An important critical review of its development, Linda Kerber identified three distinct phases within feminist analyses of this influential concept. The first occurred in the 1960s, notably through the work of Barbara Welter who, contra Alexis de Tocqueville's approving observation in 1840 regarding the correlation between the elevated status of American women and their confinement within the narrow circle of domestic life, interpreted the separate spheres in more derivative terms as a synonym for female incarceration within the home. Second, the publication in 1975 of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's seminal essay, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual', marked a distinctly different theoretical approach to the separate spheres notion. Smith-Rosenberg suggested that the rigid differentiation of nineteenth-century American gender roles gave rise to an autonomous, homosocial female world bound together through kinship networks and women's shared life experiences of marriage, family and religion. This evocative depiction of a supportive and empowering female culture transformed previous negative readings of women's sphere. Consequently, a new theoretical framework for feminist history was engendered, that of a discrete 'women's culture'. This was an approach favoured particularly by American historians such as Nancy Cott and Estelle Freedman who reconstructed the domestic female sphere as a generative site of feminist identity formation that shaped the pattern of women's subsequent social and political activism.
Debates around women's culture were a timely response to the growing sense of unease that, by continuing to work within a masculinist historical framework, feminists had so far inadvertently reinforced the subordinate status of women. Theories of women's culture meant that new 'woman-centred' categories such as the familial and domestic realms assumed analytical centre-stage. The male public sphere was re-privileged as the main arena of authentic historical activity, and the relentless narrative of women's oppression was replaced by a more optimistic envisioning of the active female subject. But the "turn to culture" did not go unchallenged. In 1980 a symposium was published in Feminist Studies that articulated widespread concerns about the increasing cultural focus in feminist history, not least the recurrent theme of the depoliticisation of feminist history. Those in favour of 'women's culture', such as Smith-Rosenberg and Mari Jo Buhle, pointed to the more radical aspects of a theory that broadened and democratised the vision of feminist history away from the study of a narrow cadre of female elites to the daily experiences of all women. But its critics, notably Ellen DuBois, regarded the sometimes romanticised portrayal of female domesticity as an ineffectual way to challenge patriarchal structures, reminding readers that any form of women's culture still existed in a world characterised by men (DuBois et al., Reading 43).

Since the late 1980s, various analytical inadequacies of the 'separate spheres' have been identified, not least its geographical, racial and class-based limitations. In a 2002 retrospective analysis of Welter's original essay, Donna Guy observed, for example, that the opportunity to join the ranks of 'domestic feminism' did not arise until the twentieth century for Latin American women, inspired not by phrases of middle-class respectability but by nationalist ideologies and public health campaigns. Moreover, as both a nineteenth-century metaphor and a historical analytical framework, the concept of the gendered separate spheres was heavily criticised for reproducing unproblematically the very assumptions that required interrogation. Historical evidence of prescriptive ideology, with actual historical practice was just one aspect of Amanda Vickery's blistering attack on the dominance of separate spheres in British feminist historiography, the other was her demonstration of the sheer permeability and interconnectedness of the spatial locations inhabited by women and men in the past (Vickery, Reading 3). It was this latter argument, borne out by a wealth of scholarship in the 1990s, which demonstrated the extensive political, civic and social activity of women and, conversely, the significance of the private and domestic world for men, that eventually toppled the dominance of the separate spheres as an overworked and overly mechanistic trope.

Nevertheless, the longevity and durability of the metaphor is still apparent in feminist scholarship. Italian feminist research remains strongly focused around the public/private axis, and in German feminist historiography, according to Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth Harvey, there appears 'little inclination to abandon this approach' because of the particular firmness of the boundaries of private and public in modern Germany. Recent retrospectives of Welter's work also testify to the staying power of her original analysis. The public/private divide continues, therefore, to prompt analytical refinements more sensitised to period, class and national identity and recent interrogations of the concept in Middle Eastern and Brazilian women's history have revealed a renewed enthusiasm for its potential to foster comparative and transnational feminist histories.

**Gender as a category of historical analysis**

In 1990, the editors of the US-based *Journal of Women's History* suggested that feminist history was witnessing a "subalternandalization". The separate-spheres theory had 'bewritten its usefulness' and was passing the epistemological baton onto a new analytical category of 'gender' that sought to locate women within a broader framework of their social, cultural and political relationships with men. Calls for a historical analysis of gender had occurred as early as the 1970s in influential essays by Natalie Zemon Davis and Joan Kelly. For Zemon Davis it was self-evident that feminist historians address the experiences of both sexes:

"It seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subject of the 'women's movement'..." any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past... to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change."

Previous reconstructions of 'women's culture' appeared on the surface to be prohibitively rare of the history of men, but the traces of a more relational gender theory were always evident within the concept of the separate spheres. As Kerber reflected, the need to break out of the restrictive dualism of an oppressive term (women's sphere) and a liberating term (women's culture) propelled a third stage in the development of the metaphor of separate spheres, as how, in short, both public and private, female and male spheres influenced each other reciprocally. Kerber's 'third stage' was exemplified in Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987, rep. 2002) which quickly became a canonical, although not uncontroversial, text for feminist historians in the Anglophone world. Family Fortunes was firmly located within a materialist, social-scientific understanding of gender despite the alternative cultural and linguistic definitions in circulation at this time, as we shall see in Part II. Davidoff and Hall placed gender relations at the very heart of the formation of early nineteenth-century middle-class identity, being their formulation of the mutually constitutive forces of class and gender upon the separation of private and public spheres of activity for women and men. The work has consequently earned a reputation among some historians, unfairly in my opinion, as the high watermark of a somewhat triumphalist reading of the dominance of the separate spheres. As the retrospective introduction to the 2002 edition of the book makes clear, the authors' intentions were always more far-reaching, aiming 'to move beyond the public/private divide' to demonstrate the contested rhetoric of separate spheres.
spheres in the negotiation of gender identities. Described by Jane Randall as 'the most ambitious attempt to write a history uniting the variables of class and gender', Family Fortunes epitomises the transformative potential of gender for the re-imagining of the existing social-historical landscape. As Hall later explained:

we wanted not just to put the women back into a history from which they had been left out, but to rewrite that history so that proper recognition would be given to the ways in which gender, as a key axis of power in society, provides a crucial understanding of how any society is structured and organized.34

The limitations of a 'compensatory' and 'separatist' approach to feminist history had already become increasingly apparent by the 1990s. As Scott observed in 1991, 'women's history was tolerated by liberal intellectuals... but it remained outside the dominant concerns of the discipline, its subversive challenge seemingly contained in a separate sphere'.35 Gender theory accordingly appeared to offer a way out of this theoretical impasse. In a prescient 1982 discussion of its transformative potential as 'a fundamental category of historical analysis', Elizabeth Fox-Genovese outlined the cultural and relational constituents of gender and its primary as a critical feature of all social relations.36 Both Scott in 1986 and Bock in 1989 were to reinforce the way in which the operations of gender, as a social and historical category rather than biological category, could be analyzed in relation to other cultural formations such as class, race, age, sexuality and religion (Bock, Reading 5). Because of its capacity to intersect with so many areas of traditional historical inquiry, gender was heralded by Scott, Bock and others as a powerful means through which to refigure history (Bock, Reading 5; Scott, Reading 7).

The prospect of an approach that might genuinely reconceive not just the narrative content of mainstream history but also its theoretical underpinnings generated a tremendous sense of anticipation. Alongside this, however, ran a more sceptical understanding of feminism's potential. An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response An important and controversial outcome of gender history was feminist response. As the Japanese historian Ogino Mino observed, 'men are omnipresent in history, but men as gendered, their bodies, minds, feelings, private lives and sexualities - remained transparent and unexplored'.37 For some national historiographies such as that of Russia, the political neutrality of 'gender' and its disassociation with 'feminism' provided a more advantageous approach to the development of women's history.38

But June Purvis and Amanda Weatherhill expressed the concerns of many when they characterised the shift towards a more 'neutral', 'brevet' discourse of gender as a renewed silencing and marginalisation of women through restoring men to the narrative centre. For Purvis and Weatherhill, the re-legitimation of men's history under the pulse of gender signalled a dangerous 'malestream incorporation strategy' that depoliticised and decontextualised the original feminist challenge (Corfield et al., Reading 6). Gender history could all too easily downplay men's privileged access to power allowing patriarchy, as Lois Banner described it, 'to engage in that disappearing act at which it has been so adept'.39

The cultural and linguistic specificity of this controversy was primarily the concern of anthropologist feminist historians. As Revi Braudel noted in an interview with the feminist philosopher Judith Butler, the notion of 'gender' was a particular 'vicissitude of the English language, one which bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages.40 Certainly in the Italian, French and German feminist movements, the term 'gender' found no direct, successful equivalent. The Italian term genre, according to Silvia Montani, referred more to 'individuality' than 'sexuality', whereas the German word geschlecht - meaning both sex and gender - was unable to flag the cultural distinctiveness of the latter term41 (Bock, Reading 5). The French historian Michèle Rieu-Saïcy argued, on the other hand, that the semantic difficulties raised by the term genre in French were merely a 'convenient pretext'42 for the wider avoidance of gender theory in women's history.

Despite these linguistic anomalies and their varying justifications, gender history marked a significant theoretical re-orientation for feminists. In the shift from a history of subjects to a history of relations, whether or not it heralded a new episodology, its task of providing a dissection of the functional interdependencies of the discipline - in short, just about every general issue of concern to historians today.

In addition, it should be noted that the global expansion of gender history during the past twenty-five years has been remarkable. Continuing the original internationalism of feminist history, many insightful theoretical contributions on gender have been articulated beyond Europe and the US, including India, Australia, Canada, Ireland and the Caribbean and, more recently, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Russia, China and Japan.43 Much, though not all, of this scholarship has followed a parallel development to the Euro-American phenomenon of moving from an explicitly politicalised feminist history to gender history, as in Japanese and Caribbean Historiographies. Where feminism has been marginalised as representative of the hegemony of Western intellectual discourse, for example, 'gender has provided a more immediate and productive theoretical approach to representing women's lives and for analysing the relations between women and men.44 As we shall see in Part IV, many Black and Third World feminist scholars have explored the mutually constitutive formations of gender and race and the complex tensions between dominant and counter-cultural articulations of the. Patricia Mohammed's discussion of post-migrant Indian communities in Trinidad between 1917 and 1947, for example, illustrates the
The nature of the poststructuralist challenge is an appropriately evasive one to define, given its resistance to totalising forms of expression. It incorporates elements as diverse as the decentering of the subject and the abandonment of 'grand narratives', but is probably best known for its affirmation of the inescapable contingency of language in the creation of historical meaning. Language, according to poststructuralist thought, simultaneously arises from, and inscribes, 'reality'. As Judith Butler and Joan Scott have observed, however, poststructuralism *is* not, strictly speaking, a position, but rather a critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which 'positions' (including feminist positions) are established.* Feminist historians in the Anglophone world became best acquainted with the major tenets of what is now called 'linguistic turn' through the American historian Joan Scott and the British philosopher Donna Riley whose work provided a central reference point throughout the late 1970s and 1980s (Scott, Reading 7; Riley, Reading 8). Drawing upon leading French theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Scott and Riley proposed a radical reconceptualisation of existing readings of gender. Rather than recovering the historical experiences of women and men as evidence of sexual difference, they focused instead on how that difference was produced discursively as a normative system of knowledge and meaning and how identities of gender were disseminated variously over time. As Scott remarked in 1986 in the introduction to *Gender and the Politics of History*, a collection of essays that included her landmark 1986 article, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis':

> the story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them; instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed.

According to Scott, such a paradigmatic shift was necessary because, as noted in Part I, the subversive potential of feminist history had failed to re-work and refigure the fundamental concepts and theoretical categories of the wider discipline. The 'add and stir' approach of women's history had perseverated rather than challenged the essentialised, male/female binary structures of traditional history. Only by deconstructing those very categories that had been the constitutive foundation of feminist historical analyses so far, argued Scott — women, identity, experience, agency, subjectivity — could such a transformation be possible (Scott, Reading 7). The relationship between a pre-given social experience and the formation of subject-identity assumed by social scientific understandings of gender was thus ruptured by the deconstructionalist 'methodology of poststructuralist feminism'. Butler's influential collapse of the fundamental distinction was also a formative moment here. The female or male body could not be seen as an essential, pre-discursive 'reality', she argued, for even orthodox formulations of the sexes/gender distinction were shaped as 'a multiple interpretation' (sex and thus could not be said to flow directly from it. Whether gender, as a system of knowledge about sexual difference, was produced variably at different times or places is a different question and depends on specific discourses as gender itself. Similarly, poststructuralist feminists argue that historical subjects were not constituted by a set of unmediated or self-evident

Part II: Deconstructing the subject: feminist history and
'the linguistic turn'

Could it be argued that the only way of avoiding these constant historical loops which depart or return from the conviction of women's natural predispositions would be to make a grander gesture — to stand back and announce that there aren't any women?

Denise Riley, *Does a Sex Have a History?*, 1988

Poststructuralism came late to history — hardly surprising given that the dominant positivist and empirical methods utilised by most historians. Yet, when it arrived, its impact was momentous. No approach has stimulated more controversy or brought the 'theoretical' into quite such sharp relief for feminist scholars during the last twenty years, controversies which I now outline and to which I add a critical commentary
experiences, but by particular discourses of gender, class or race that valorised and gave meaning to those experiences.

The refutation of sexual difference as an original basis upon which cultural conditions of gender might then be formulated generated an extraordinary amount of feminist debate, ranging from the outright hostile to the more positively and strategically engaged. It is important to locate these debates within the broader context of discussions taking place on the nature of history per se at the time and to recognise that many of the following responses were also those of historians more generally. Yet the undeniable fact that most leading poststructuralist thinkers were men – for the majority of whom neither gender nor feminism was the primary analytical concern – gave the feminist critique a particular edge. This gendering of poststructuralism as male is worth pausing to consider briefly before moving onto the particular theoretical and epistemological issues raised by this approach.

Concerns over the masculinism of the poststructuralist tradition were expressed in ways similar to parallel debates surrounding the ‘turn to gender’ referred to in Part I. In other words, that women might once again be eclipsed by men as both discursive subjects and mediators of the past. American historian Joan Hoff and the British sociologist Stevi Jackson were explicit in their condemnation of the theory’s ‘misogynistic’ origins, and even poststructuralist sympathisers such as the Canadian historian Mariana Valverde commented on Scott’s unhelpful tendency to ‘pull Foucault and Deleuze out of the methodological hat as offering solutions to the problems of women’s history’.

Yet it would be difficult to think of any major feminist theorist, poststructuralist or otherwise, who had not drawn variably upon the work of a ‘feminal’ male thinker like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, Lacan, Edward Said or E. P. Thompson, to name but a few. Here the salient point is not that feminist historians should avoid using male theorists on the grounds that they may be innately misogynist, but that they are not dislocated from feminist causes by such appropriations, nor hesitant about reframing male theorists for political purposes directed towards the interests of women.

Indirectly related to this critique was the rather more different claim that many radical poststructuralist insights had, in fact, long formed part of feminist epistemologies. ‘We did not need poststructuralism to develop gender as a category of analysis’ observed Catherine Hall, nor did feminists ‘need Foucault to understand that power operates on many sites, or poststructuralism to understand that historical writing is itself a mode of constructing knowledge’. Hall has a point. It is undoubtedly the case that feminists had taken a leading role in the 1980s in exposing the subjectivity of ‘truth’ and the gendered politics of knowledge as well as revealing the dangers of essentialism via the proliferation of competing feminist identity politics. In her discussion of the turn to poststructuralist readings of gender, for example, Kathleen Canning begins by reminding us of the powerful challenge posed precisely along these lines by feminist scholars to the canon of social history (Rose et al., Reading 9). But did this mean that poststructuralism was simply part of an already established legacy of feminist historical critique, or was it something more fundamentally discontinuous? I would contend that it was the latter. The challenge first thrown down by Scott and Riley was of a very different epistemological kind,

moving from feminist theoretical critiques of narrative history to an interrogation of the historical project itself. Accordingly, three main areas of contention have surfaced repeatedly in feminist historians’ discussions of poststructuralism: subjectivity and identity, women’s historical and political agency and the language experience dualism. The remainder of this Part will examine each of these in more detail.

Subjectivity and identity

Despite an awareness of the constructed nature of gender identities and the capacity of language to produce and legitimate social inequalities, the writing of feminist history had continued in the main to rest upon the assertion of a pre-existing, coherent female identity, the shared commonalities of which provided a secure foundation for historical analyses of the broader condition and status of women’s lives. As will be seen in Part IV, black and Third World feminists had already mounted a significant critique of essentialism, deconstructing their women’s histories as ‘differ- ent’ merely as an analytical category rather than falsifying the universality of the female subject. But the development of an increasing plurality of feminist histories had not, until now, sought to dismantle the pre-formed, foundational status of female subjectivity and deconstruct it of an underlying, essentialist base. Denise Riley was to do exactly that. In her frequently quoted study of the category of ‘woman’ in history, Riley denied the existence of any core or originary ‘woman’ behind the historical contingencies of time and place. On the contrary, ‘women were a volatile collective’ whose identities were constantly in process, defined and redefined through an endless series of conflicting discursive practices. ‘Some characterisation or other of woman’ is eternally in play’ she argued, ‘the question then for a feminist history is to discover whose, and with what effects’. Such indeterminacy was the very basis for any meaningful history of women. It was neither postfeminist nor antifeminist. Riley argued, articularising as it did the many constraints upon, and alliances of, different feminist strategies (Riley, Reading 8).

The suggestion that women were cultural constructs ‘all the way down’, the ‘effects’ of historically variable discourses, generated a profound unease among many feminist historians who regarded this stance as an attack upon the self-understanding and identity of women and upon the very legitimacy of the feminist history project itself. Poststructuralists were accused of an extreme anti-essentialism where the actual experiences of women were denounced in favour of a representation of the female self as a series of ephemeral fluctuations, and where ‘flesh-and-blood women’ became social constructs (Hoff et al., Reading 10). The centrality to feminist theory of the material dimensions of women’s oppression meant that poststructuralist readings of the female subject were perceived as diminishing the significance of bodily and physical suffering. This was compounded by what was perceived as an extreme form of cultural relativism denying any universally agreed foundations upon which to make moral judgements and underestimating the certainty of the feminist (or any other) ethical position. As Stevi Jackson demanded, ‘What basis is there for arguing that a feminist reading of forced sexual intercourse as rape is any more valid than the rapist’s interpretation of it as pleasurable seduction?’ Grounded in the realist certainties of identity politics, many feminist
scholars maintained that sexual difference could never be adequately mediated by language alone. ‘If women is an empty category then why am I afraid to walk alone at night?’ was the provocative title of an article by Laura Lee Davies who argued therein that:

deconstruction leaves aside the dilemmas of women, who must live as subjects in time... sexual difference is not something which can simply be argued into a corner and then left behind. Rather, individuals must inhabit those gendered categories, even as they strive to unmake them.

Women's historical and political agency

Underpinning these sometimes rancorous exchanges was a key dilemma for feminists; namely, how is the history of women to be written without a common understanding of the terms ‘woman’ or ‘women’s experience’? Poststructuralism’s disregard of any one-to-one correspondence theory of ‘truth’ (in other words of a direct correlation between identity formation and social location) was a major theoretical obstacle for those feminists who felt that without a shared identity or a set of experiences women’s ability to mobilise themselves and to develop strategies for political change was compromised and undercut. As Purvis asserted, ‘The emphasis on difference at the expense of what women have in common denies the existence of women as a political category and as a subordinate class’ (Hoff et al., Reading 10).

The related problematic of political and historical agency or, as Anna Clark puts it, ‘how to draw the elegant postmodernist play with language to the gritty historical questions of power’, proved a persistent focus of debate throughout the 1980s (Ross et al., Reading 9). In a rather acrimonious exchange of book reviews between Joan Scott and Linda Gordon, the impact of their contrasting understandings of the term ‘agency’ was all too evident. Gordon interpreted historical agency in conventional terms as that of a self-directed, autonomous act of will, whereas Scott’s description was that of a ‘discursive effect’ in which individual or collective agency was constituted through the particularities of a given situation and a specific conjecture of power relations. For Gordon, describing agency as ‘a discursive effect’ was not only to effectively ‘drain that notion of any meaning’ but also to problematise any direct relation to the women’s lives under scrutiny. Her additional observation that a ‘language-as-primary position produced a subtle deflection away from issues of political power’ struck a chord at the time with feminist historians on both sides of the Atlantic. Even those sympathetic to poststructuralist insights saw the emphasis on textual and linguistic analysis as undermining the role of feminist political agency because of its perceived disregard for social historical context. Doubts were also expressed whether or not a mere shift in discursive identities would ever be sufficient to explain social and political change. Words may well have the ‘power to define reality’, argued Claudia Koonz, but poststructuralists did not ‘explore the process by which they can change reality’ and transform the position of real women.

Language and experience

This critique of the depoliticising impact of poststructuralism has remained a key issue. Thus Chicana feminist, Paola Moya, has recently contended that ‘is politics of discourse that does not provide for some sort of bodily or concrete action outside the realm of the academic text will forever be inadequate to change the difficult “reality” of our lives’. I would suggest, however, that such claims have rested precariously on the tendency of some feminist historians – and anti-poststructuralist historians more generally – to dichotomise the linguistic/discursive and pre-discursive/material dimensions of analysis, deploying language as somehow situated outside of the material realm. In her 1987 review of Scott’s essay ‘On Language, Gender and Working-Class History’, Christine Stansell’s assertion that the conundrum of nineteenth-century political radicalism was formed in the realm of ‘a social experience quite distinct from the realm of speech and text’ typifies this approach. Given that the very construction of feminist history of the past lay in the explicit appeal to women’s experience, this polarisation was perhaps not surprising. Yet the notion of some self-evident base of ‘reality’ upon which a ‘superstructure’ of discursive articulations might freely float was always a fallacious one, not least because, confronted with the wealth of women’s different ‘realities’ revealed in the debates of the 1980s, the appeal to historical experience or subjectivity as if it were uncontested evidence had already been exposed as obscuring a whole range of exclusionary practices.

It is worth clarifying at this point, therefore, Deirdra’s famous phrase ‘il n'y a pas de hors-texte’ (there is nothing outside of the text) and the frequently mistaken reading of this by those historians who have insisted on bifurcating language and materiality in such an uncompromising way. The intrinsic interrelatedness of text and context can be illustrated in two ways. First, by Deirdra who, rather than denying the existence of material reality, insisted that ‘what I call “text” implies all the structures called “real”, “economic”, “historical”, “social”, institutional, in short: all possible referents’. And, second, by Scott’s reminder that the seemingly unproblematic status of a material context also always necessitated the selection of key events or circumstances, ‘and so constitutes a textual moment’ itself. Interpreting the poststructuralist position as an anti-realist one that the “text” or “reality” does not physically exist outside language has proved a persistent misreading by historians, generating a series of unnecessarily defensive and aggressive confrontations. For no poststructuralists, as far as I am aware, are anti-realists. Rather, they are all anti-representationists, that is to say that they do not think that there is any direct correspondence between the world and human representations of it that could be described as true. This does not mean that feminist historians cannot reconstruct or re-present women’s pasts, but that such representations will always be incomplete and imperfect (Butler, Reading 12). In order to make sense of the history of women and feminism we must, as I suggested previously, impose a linguistic shape upon the past that the past itself doesn’t have – we must ‘prop up’ and ‘implant’ it, to use Hayden White’s celebrated verbs. It is not that women have no existence outside language, then, but that that existence has no ‘determinable meaning’ outside language – a very different emphasis. Thus
the meaning of ‘discourse analysis’ may be better comprehended, as Louise Newman has pointed out, as circumventing rather than consolidating the language/real binary.

Discourses compose practices as well as beliefs, are both material as well as ideological, and may take a whole range of cultural forms: social institutions, aesthetic productions, political systems, popular cultures, economic structures, ideological belief systems, and so forth.66

As a system of knowledge about sexual difference, gender, class and race, it is always established through discursive sites of power located in social institutions, organisations and structures. According to Scott, therefore, being a subject, even in poststructuralist terms, means being ‘subject to definite conditions of existence’ for ‘historical explanation cannot . . . separate the two’.67

With this clarification, it now becomes possible to rethink previous feminist assertions of poststructuralism’s politically paralysing effects. In their introduction to Feminists Theorise the Political (1992), Butler and Scott intimate that deconstructionist methods are rich with political possibilities, enabling scholars to reveal the contradictions and incompatibilities inherent in any dominant discourse, exposing the hidden operations of power and illumining the expression of subordination has been both perpetuated and resisted.68 For them the refusal to critically examine the category of ‘woman’ or enquire into the construction of female agency had sanctioned all manner of racial and class privileges (Butler, Reading 12). Hence black feminist historians such as bell hooks and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her seminal article ‘African-American History and the Metaland Language of Race’,69 and much to recommend in the interrogation of ‘difference’ proposed by poststructuralists as opposed to traditional definitions of identity that have left ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ as unhistoricised and essentialised categories (hooks, Reading 11).

And so in these postfeminist, post-poststructuralist times, how might the impact of poststructuralism upon feminist history be evaluated? The work of historians such as Judith Walkowitz, Kathleen Canning, Lara Mani, Cecilia Morgan, Lynda Roper and Antoinette Burton, as well as Scott herself, is illustrative of a growing body of feminist scholarship seeking to engage critically with poststructuralist ideas in areas as diverse as late-Victorian narratives of sexual danger, female workers in the Canadian textile industry, the formation of the Canadian colonial middle classes, and witchcraft and sexuality in early modern Europe.70 New feminist theories such as ‘strategic essentialism’ and ‘postpositivist realism’ have also emerged as attempts to ‘strategic ways’ in which women might appeal to common political interests to mobilise themselves, albeit in ways understood as partial and provisional.71

There can be no doubt, I think, that poststructuralism has therefore left a revolutionary and as yet incomplete legacy for the writing and theorising of feminist history. We now live in what Laura Lee Downs has described as a more ‘theoretically transdose’ era72 from which there can be no return to the unreflective use of key analytical categories or, as Susan Kingsley Kent remarks, to a nostalgic desire for a unified female subjectivity (Hoff et al., Reading 10). A new generation of feminist histories concerned with exploring the relationship between the discursive production of gender identities and the material context in which such discourses were naturalised and resisted have rethought what Mary Louise Roberts describes as the ‘smooth surfaces’ and ‘optimism’ of the modernist story.73 Disrupting linear narratives of women’s progress and advance has been to feminist hearts as that of any historian in favour of histories of contradiction and ambivalence may be unsettling, but to remain indifferent to the epidemiological and ontological challenges raised by poststructuralism is, even now, to risk reproducing, unexamined, the most fundamental of historical categories. The exclusionary consequences of a normative, non-approach to the category ‘woman’ are all too well highlighted in Parts III and IV wherein the challenges posed by lesbian and black feminist historians are examined and discussed.

Part III: Searching for the subject: lesbian history

The word ‘lesbian’ must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence, the closet-game, the creation of the UNSPARKABLE. Adrienne Rich, ‘It is the Lesbian in Us’, 1977

Lesbian history developed during the early 1960s within a political context of the women’s and gay liberation movements and an academic context of an emergent history of sexuality. It constituted another major theoretical shift in the historical consciousness of women’s lives through its critique of the heteronormativity of feminist history and the consequent erasure of the lesbian subject. Historians of lesbianism have, from the outset, articulated their research on same-sex sexuality within an explicit political agenda that aims not only to restore the lesbian subject to history, but also to expose the ingrained homophobia of dominant patriarchal discourses such as religion, medical science, the law and even feminism itself. Over twenty-five years ago, in her classic essay ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, the American poet and writer Adrienne Rich argued that heterosexuality was a central organising principle of patriarchy that prevented women from experiencing ‘primary intensity’ with other women. Rich’s influential concept of the ‘lesbian continuum’, which she re-articulated in 2003 as ‘the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny (and) the giving and receiving of practical and political support’, between women, provided feminist historians with one important, although not uncontroversial, impetus in the mapping of lesbian desire. Over the last three decades a significant body of work has been produced on the origins of lesbian identity, as well as on the historical reconstruction of various manifestations of love and sex between women. Making particular use of oral testimonies, biographical and literary approaches, a rich legacy of lesbian life behaviour and culture has been identified which includes cross-dressing, romantic friendships, student-teacher ‘crushes’, passing women, butch/femme partners, transgressive politics and a diverse range of women-only communities.75
As with feminist history more generally, early approaches to lesbian history combined radical political aims with primarily recuperative historical objectives, seeking to bring to visibility a hitherto hidden lesbian past. Not surprisingly, it was white middle- and upper-middle-class women (those most likely to have left documentary evidence of their passions) that provided the focus of such historical narratives, yet the ‘outing’ of prominent women figures such as Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Pannorby, or Emily Dickinson and Sue Gilbert, has not been without difficulty. Few unequivocal accounts have been left by those who chose to live at the sexual margins. Those accounts that have survived have often been subject to forms of ‘homophobic vandalism, effacement and suppression’** by the families of the women concerned or their heteronormative biographers (Faderman, Reading 13). This effective sanitisation of lesbian existence is compounded by its overwhelming legal invisibility, unlike lesbian history’s male counterpart, gay history. As Jennifer Terry has commented: ‘Lesbians have not had much of a public sexuality – often (being) seen more as a threat to the family than a threat to the stress’.** Despite encouraging signs of an increasing range of lesbian archival material as evidenced in Alison Dran on Amniamie Turnbull’s, The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex between Women in Britain from 1780 to 1970 (2001), the relative absence and arbitrariness of historical sources has had a significant effect upon lesbian understandings of identity formation. Best, by a sense of what Judith Butnett stipulates as ‘definitional uncertainty’, a powerful but problematic politics of identity has come to dominate much lesbian historical discourse. Rich’s call to affirm the ‘lesbian’ in the quote at the beginning of this section, when the term itself has no clear or agreed referent, has proved a considerable epistemological challenge. As Martha Vicinus has commented: ‘The lesbian is an accepted subject for scrutiny – she exists, but how are we to define her history, who we do include and when did it begin?’ (Vicinus, Reading 15).

Does it matter if they did it? Lesbian identity politics and sex

A key controversy surrounding this search for a lesbian subject identity has focused on the significance, or otherwise, of sexual activity. As Sheila Jeffreys asked in 1986, ‘Does it matter if they did it?’ (Jeffreys, Reading 14). In what is arguably the most influential analytical concept in lesbian history to date, that of ‘romantic friend/ship’ (see Reading 14). The recovery of women’s self-conscious presentations of romantic friendships as romantic friendships is a primary aim of the book. Combining idée drawn from Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’ with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s influential account for lesbian historians of the intimate, homosocial women’s culture of nineteenth-century America (previously discussed in Part I), Lillian Faderman’s pathbreaking book, Surprising the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (1981), presented what was to become a significant historical ‘Paradigm’ in lesbian scholarship: namely, the existence of an innocent ‘golden age’ of passionate, non-genital female friendships brought to an abrupt end by the pathologising discourse of late-Victorian sexologists who first categorised lesbian behaviour as sexually ‘deviant’. The impact of sexualised readings upon the formation of a modern lesbian identity has ever since been energetically debated.** But it was Faderman’s de-criminalised reading of lesbianism that sparked the greatest single reaction. Many felt that to de-criminalise lesbian history in the way she did was an unacceptable betrayal of women who experienced daily oppression as a result of their sexual and political choices. According to a founder of the New York Lesbian Herstory Archives, Joan Nestle, Rich’s assertion that ‘every woman is a lesbian’ was nothing but ‘hysterical pasturing that obfuscated the material realities of all women’s lives’. As Jeffreys similarly argued, lesbian experience could not be ‘subsumed beneath the good feelings of hand-holding sisterhood’ (Jeffreys, Reading 14). In the romantic friendship archetype, passion between women ‘regardless of whether or not the women engaged in genital sex’, had been essentialised and, in so doing, feminist scholarship had erased the distinctiveness and plurality of lesbian identity.**

In the literary historical approach, scholars challenged not so much the class limitations of the ‘romantic friendship’ model but the assumed sexual naivety of both the women concerned and their surrounding culture. The number of references to shadow, tribulation or cross-dressing in British print as early as the 1730s was justification enough for Emma Donoghue to argue that eighteenth-century writers did indeed perceive women who loved women as ‘a distinct sexual and social group’.** According to Lisa Moore, the social wariness and prohibition that often surrounded these relationships also suggested a cultural awareness of female sexual transgression not present in Faderman’s original thesis of socially condoned nineteenth-century ‘romantic’ friendships. The recovery of women’s self-conscious presentations of lesbian sexual desire, as in Karen Harper’s account of the intimate references to ‘bussom sex’ between Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, two nineteenth-century African-American women, was also important for a more sexualised reading of lesbian history, providing new theoretical possibilities for claiming lesbianism as an originary identity rather than just a reactionary discourse against hegemonic medical-scientific constructions of lesbian ‘deviancy’.** Anna Clark’s important and lively discussion of the early-nineteenth century English landowner, Anne Lister, makes precisely this point. Lister’s sexually explicit diary, the archive, offers powerful evidence of lesbian passion, albeit coded, well before the advent of male sexualological categories. Keen to emphasise the role of women’s agency in lesbian identity formation, Clark points out that Lister would have ‘naturally’ drawn
upon the cultural representations available to her at the time but that she ultimately ‘invented her own fragmented lesbian identity and conflused the categories of masculinity and femininity’. Although not numerous, the recovery of such sexually self-aware texts have, in some ways, complicated the theoretical complexities of lesbian history not least because of the ‘misgendering effect’ of an approach in which ‘confirmed’ lesbians end up as a tiny proportion of women. The rarity of such self-defined narratives also raises questions concerning the extent to which historians privilege self-identification in their definition of lesbian identity for, as Vicinus has asked: ‘What kind of ahistorical presumption is it to speak of “lesbians” before the formation of either communities or individuals who used this word?’

**Queer theory**

One way out of the ‘identity dilemma’ that the above debates had become immersed in — not least because it aimed to dismantle the category of ‘lesbian’ altogether — was provided by ‘queer theory’, which developed strongly in the wake of post-structuralism during the 1980s and 1990s. Queer theory is distinguished by an oppositional stance towards heteronormative readings of sexuality and gender, a thoroughgoing scepticism towards traditional identity politics, and a refusal of the marginal status of homosexuality (Vicinus, Reading 1). Thus the notion of butch/femme role-playing as an inferior imitation of heterosexuality is inherently rejected by queer scholars. In Judith Butler’s celebrated formulation, heterosexuality, like all gender, is performative, and so merely produces the effect of being naturalized by establishing itself ‘as the sign and the ground of all identifications’.

While cognizant of the political expediency of realist identity categories, queer theorists such as Butler, Lisa Duggan and Donna Penn, argue that all forms of sexual essentialism gettise on theoretical horizons and replicate oppressive practices (Penn, Reading 16). As noted in Part II, fixed identity categories are seen as ‘instruments of regulatory regimes’ for Butler who prefers to leave what lives under the sign of ‘lesbian’ as ‘permanently unclear’. ‘What, if anything can lesbians be said to share?’, she asks, ‘and who will decide this question, and in the name of whom?’. In this position, ‘definitional uncertainty’ is not a concern; rather it is welcomed as a radical, open-ended theoretical device that avoids the pitfalls of relying on any sexual category as normative.

Instead of searching for the self-evident lesbian subject, therefore, queer theorists have focused upon the dynamic historical formation of lesbian and gay subjectivities through discourses of resistance and acts of transgression. Instead of reading for identity, queer theory challenges the heteronormativity of feminist historiography by reading for ‘difference’ in search of what Jennifer Terry refers to as ‘deviant subjectivity’. Lesbian history cannot hope to free itself of the influence of discriminatory heterocentric discourses that, she argues, have relied parasitically upon lesbians and gays to establish their own authority. Nevertheless, it is possible to queer the history of heterosexual hegemony by first ‘reading against the grain’ in order to establish the ways in which homosexuality has been produced as deviant and, second, by mapping the diverse methods of resistance to, and subversion of, such homophobia. Yet, despite Donna Peter’s contention in 1995 that queer theory might provide the space in which to begin rethinking categories of inclusion and exclusion that guide our historical work, the tangible impact of queer theory over the past ten years in furthering lesbian historical work, as opposed to stimulating debates on theory and epistemology, has been a limited one. (Penn, Reading 16).

Martha Vicinus acknowledges, for example, that queer theory has produced some impressively freeing notions for historians, particularly its dismantling of the need to seek out a coherent identity, but that its emphasis upon the performative nature of gender has all too often proved unhelpfully ahistorical (Vicinus, Reading 15).

Queer theory has not passed unchallenged by feminist historians, therefore, not only because of its poststructuralist, presentist methods, but also because of its inclusion of gay as well as lesbian subjectivities. Male homosexuality is all too closely allied with patriarchy for Rosemary Auchmuty, Sheila Jeffreys and Elaine Miller who have warned of the need to remain vigilant about the possibility of gay sexism and the retention of an overly feminist perspective on lesbian experience.

According to this approach the profound disparities in historical experience between lesbians and gays suggests that lesbian history needs to maintain its own distinct theoretical priorities. Yet, others have argued that there are limits to such a separatist agenda. Queer theorist Lisa Duggan, for example, deplores the generally ‘stained relations’ between queer theory and lesbian history that has produced ‘devastating consequences’ for the intellectual vitality of both discourses.

**Lesbians and ‘difference’**

From a quite different perspective black lesbian writers such as Barbara Smith have also argued that lesbian and gay history should be read and written as part of an integrated history of gender in which it is impossible to understand the experiences of one group without the other. ‘My own experience as a Black lesbian during the past two decades’, she writes, ‘indicates that Black lesbians and men are linked by our shared racial, identity and political status in ways that white lesbians and gays are not’. Smith was, of course, a founder member of the Combahee River Collective whose ‘Black Feminist Statement’ of 1979 was a pioneering manifesto for black lesbian politics. Unlike most single-identity groups competing around either gender or race, the Combahee River Collective acknowledged the need for a multiple analysis of oppression: ‘Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand’.

In addition to challenging white lesbians’ prioritization of sexuality over other identity categories (a theme to which I will return in Part IV), lesbians of colour have also written at length on the privileged status accorded to traditional family life within black communities as a supreme badge of respectability and upward mobility. As Makeda Silvera observes in her poignant reflections upon the invisibility of African-Caribbean lesbians, dominant racist representations of the hyper-sexuality of black women have led to a heightened suspicion of any form of sexual ‘deviance’. For many black heterosexual women, she argues, ‘it is incomprehensible, almost frightening that one could turn her back on credibility in our community.’
by being lesbians' 97 Such emphatic heteronormativity is also highlighted by Judy Tsu-Chun Wu in a recent 2003 discussion of Asian-American history. Tsu-Chun Wu explains the ways in which American immigration and anti-miscegenation laws obstructed the formation of Asian-American family life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The subsequent engrainment of heterosexual norms, she concludes, has made the public articulation of homosexuality particularly difficult for both Asian-American women and men. 98

Scholarship such as this is a salutary reminder of the need for historians to consider the ways in which lesbian sexuality invariably intersects with other 'lived' and organising categories such as race, ethnicity and class. As noted, much lesbian history to date, certainly in Britain and Europe, has focused primarily on middle-class and elite literate women. Recently, however, there have been promising indications of an increasingly global focus on lesbian lives that builds upon the above-described debates to generate important questions as to how to theorise lesbian-like behaviour in historically specific and culturally diverse contexts such as Bolshevik Russia, modern China, medieval Italy and Australian Aboriginal society. 99

(Rupp, Reading 18). This emergent work bodes well for an illumination of how dominant discourses of nationalism, race, ethnicity and colonialism have shaped expressions of lesbian experience and identity. For such work acknowledges that in many circumstances lesbians may not define themselves primarily by their sexuality at all. As Ruth Ford has argued with reference to Australian lesbian culture, 'Koori lesbians are more likely to identify themselves as Aboriginal survivors of a racist colonial society, defining themselves primarily as Koori or black rather than as lesbians.' 100

**Future perspectives in lesbian history**

How do we thus assess the influence of lesbian theory on the wider realm of women's and feminist history? What differences has it made? In practical terms, Alison Dron has contended that, in British universities at least, lesbian studies continue to be less problematic in disciplines such as literary criticism, cultural studies and women's studies than in history, where it has gained only 'an insubstantial foothold.' 101 In a similar vein, Adrienne Rich wrote in 1993 that a feminist critique of compulsory heterosexuality exorbitant for women was still 'long overdue' but it would be wrong to conclude from these statements that heteronormativity continues apace in feminist scholarship. Even this briefest of summaries demonstrates the significance of the lesbian challenge to feminist history and the complexity of theoretical reflection evinced by historians of lesbianism as they protest against the historical effacement of women who loved other women. Moreover, it is clear that newer theoretical frameworks are emerging at some speed, driven by the desire to avoid the erasure of certain groups of lesbians through race, class, age and political differences, as well as the desire to further integrate lesbian history within the larger history of feminism, gender and sexuality. In the last few years we have increased our contact with the identity model of lesbian history based on a language of self-identification – 'coming out' stories or distinctive lesbian markers and performances – has been evident. As Vicinus remarks in her Intimate
challenge of considerable magnitude and one which, when attended to and fully envisaged, could and should locate lesbian history at the cutting edge of feminist historical theory.

Part IV: Centres of difference: decolonising subjects, rethinking boundaries

Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways.
Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 1988

The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries but that does not mean it is identical within those differences for them beyond sisterhood is still racism.
Audre Lorde, 'Open Letter to Mary Daly', 1979

The concept of "difference" has proved axiomatic for feminist historians as a means of interrogating essentialised readings of key categories such as 'women' or 'sisterhood' in favour of an increasingly complex and often contradictory plurality of feminist identities. Theorising differences between women as opposed to those between women and men has proved a profound challenge. Although, as we have seen, feminist historians have not disregarded differences of race, class and sexuality among women, it has been primarily black and Third World feminist scholarship that has prioritised the theoretical ramifications of women's heterogeneity. Over the past three decades a burgeoning literature has laid bare the ethnocentric and imperialist practicities of feminist history as well as the inadequacy of western epistemological frameworks generally as the basis for comprehending the historical and cultural locations of non-white or non-western subjects.

In Part IV I consider the theoretical implications of racial and ethnic difference in the reconstruction of the category 'woman', narrating how these debates have informed, arguably with more impact than any other, the theoretical trajectory of feminist history.

Firstly, a note on terminology. The terms 'black', 'women of colour' and 'Third World' used throughout this discussion remain contested ones. This is not least because, ironically, they appear to erase differences between women by homogenising vastly diverse cultural and historical experiences. As Eilla Shakti has argued, the very notion of the 'three worlds' flattens heterogeneities, masks contradictions and elides difference. Cognizant of these conceptual limitations, black and Third World feminist scholars have nevertheless asserted that it is possible to argue for the intellectual coherence of such terms, not in any essentialist sense on the basis of racial or colour identifications, but as political categories forged out of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has described as 'a common context of struggle' against western colonial exploitation and racism. It is therefore in this latter sense that the terms are deployed here. Because of the sheer range and volume of work that has been produced in this area of feminist history I have structured the following discussion of 'centres of difference' (and the selected readings) around three broad sites of analysis: the black feminist challenge that was located mainly in the US and Britain, postcolonial feminist scholarship and, finally, transnational and comparative approaches to feminist history. Before turning to each of these examples, however, it is worth outlining one or two of the principal aspects of the epistemological challenge posed by 'difference' to feminist history.

Black and Third World feminist historians have sought primarily to impugn the theoretical colonisation and narrowness of the Western feminist vision of women's emancipation. They have argued that the sometime dominant feminist focus on patriarchy and gender alone is inadequate for theorising the complexities of black women's simultaneity of oppressions in which gender may form just one aspect of a wider, multiple experience of inequality. As Africanist Cheryl Johnson-Odim has observed, 'gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary focus of the oppression of Third World women for these women's struggles are inextricably linked to those of their particular communities against racism and imperialism'. The distillation of gender as the fundamental cause of women's oppression has been radical indeed, rendering the term 'feminism' a problematic one for those who wish to signal a theoretical and political disjuncture with white feminist analysts. Some African-American women writers prefer to use Alice Walker's term 'womanist', for example, the definition of which underlines commitment not just to women but to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. A more integrated vision of feminism as just one component of a more universal engagement with systemic forms of injustice is a theme that surfaces repeatedly throughout black and Third World scholarship. A second recurrent theme is the need to challenge the overwhelmingly theoretical imperialism exercised by Western feminist historians that has frequently hindered the development of alternative, context-specific narrative strategies and methods. As Mahsa Fakhr Araghi argued in 2004, although a seemingly transparent term, 'feminism' has figured in Third World women's histories 'as the epistemic ground that defines, indeed monopolises, the very terms within which we are obliged to pose questions of women's agency in any context'. It is also worth noting that theoretical imperialism can also operate between Western feminists as Ruth Roach-Pierson makes clear in her article, 'Colonisation and Canadian Women's History', which describes how Canada, despite its own position as a coloniser of the First Nations' peoples, also occupies a colonised status in relation to its powerful American neighbours.

How, then, does feminist history set about 'decolonising' or 'de-imperialising' its theory so as to find new ways of historicising indigenous women's pasts without reproducing other forms of exclusionary practices? This is the challenge at the heart of locating 'difference' as a central epistemological principle for feminist history, a challenge that requires both the reconstruction of black and Third World feminist histories and the simultaneous deconstruction of the hegemonic status of 'whiteness' 'Race', like gender, is a primary system of meaning through which Western thought (not least) has established hierarchical social classifications on a putative basis of biology and skin colour. As Pamela Scully remarks, as long as 'race' is perceived as synonymous with whiteness, whiteness retains its naturalized, normative and unproblematic status and the potential for ethnocentric and imperialist discourse continues. Elizabeth Speiman's pioneering book, 'Hersentail
African-American feminist history

Debates over racial difference were first played out in the US and Britain from the 1970s onwards, catalysed by the emergence of the American civil rights movement. Scholars such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar were quick to point out that in privileging a white, middle-class norm of women's experience, feminist historians had failed 'to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson', replicating the same exclusionary practices of traditional history that they had vowed to dismantle (Amos and Parmar, Reading 20). By universalising what was, in fact, a highly particularised construction of women's historical experiences, white feminists obscured the historical and cultural specificity of black women's pasts. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham reflected in 1989, the ethnocentrism of feminist history combined with the androcentrism of African-American history meant that the black woman's voice was 'largely unheard'. Early attempts to recover black women's pasts frequently served to reinforce their 'otherness' or objectification by presenting them as superstitious examples of heroic suffering or tantalising exoticism. As the black lesbian poet and writer Audre Lorde makes clear in her 'Open Letter to Mary Daly', this approach could lead to a fundamental distortion of black women's words and heritage while ensuring that dominant white theoretical frameworks remained unaffected (Lorde, Reading 21).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s African-American women scholars exposed the longstanding racism of the women's movement in a series of penetrating critiques, arguing that the 'double jeopardy' of black women's identity — the simultaneity of being both black and female — had never proved a priority for first or second wave feminism. As a result, mainstream feminist analyses of oppression and strategies for change were of limited value to women of colour. We have already seen in Part III, for example, that black feminists did not ally themselves with the separatist rhetoric of radical and/or lesbian feminism because of the primacy they accorded to racial solidarity with black men. Similarly, dominant analyses of key issues such as rape or contraception have been too often met with greater circumlocution by black women. Recalling the lynching campaigns against black men and the subjection of black and Third World women to experimental forms of population control, women of colour have identified the racist as well as misogynist connotations of such issues. As a final example, women's right to a professional career outside the 'drudgery' and 'incarceration' of domestic life, arguably the defining strategy of second wave feminism, was clearly aimed at a white, educated audience and, as such, was extraneous to the circumstances of many black women for whom family life had been a key historical site of emotional strength and survival during slavery. As leading black feminist theorists bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins observed, it was doubly ironic that the liberation of one group of women should so often be achieved upon the domestic labours of their black and working-class counterparts.

Because of the inappropriateness of many Anglo-American feminist strategies surrounding male-female relations, family life, sisterhood and sexuality, black feminist historians have conceptualised some of the most basic categories and assumptions of feminist history. In so doing they have put into place what Darlene Clark Hine has referred to as 'a quiet intellectual transformation'. Studies have emerged on black women's experience of slavery, religion and family life, labour participation and a host of philanthropic associations. More recently, studies of gender have explored the construction of black manhood and masculinity. We now know that black women such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Ida B. Wells played vital political roles as orators and activists, redefining hegemonic constructions of womanhood. We know from Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's recent work that nineteenth-century black women suffragists were supporters of a universal as opposed to a women-only franchise throughout, while Hine has shown how pervasive historical representations of black female 'hypersexuality' produced a powerful 'culture of disembolishment' on the part of black women reformers who embraced middle-class values of moral respectability in order to erase demeaning stereotypes of their humanity. Theorising difference primarily through the concept of racial solidarity has thus generated an exciting new field of feminist historical scholarship, although as Michele Mitchell's recent overview of African-American historiography makes clear, black solidarity has prevented as well as promoted theoretical innovation: 'writing about clashes between black women and men remains somewhat prickly', she remarks, 'because themes of collective survival, community mobilisation and institution building are of signal importance to the field'. Critical analyses of intra-racial tensions, domestic violence and black male sexism have therefore been less well explored, although studies such as E. Frances White's examination of the highly conservative and oppressive attitudes towards gender and sexuality promoted by African-American nationalistic discourses indicate a willingness to undertake such controversial themes.

Women of colour have revolutionised previous assumptions not only of the historical agency of black women and men but also of the way in which gender formation rarely pivots around a simple oppositional binary of male and female. The notion that a woman's identity formation takes place not just in contrast to that of men's but over and against women of other racial and class-based statuses, has transformed feminist historical thinking on 'difference' and led to a series of inspirational theoretical reflections on the potential for more relational analyses of gender. Two examples of this will suffice to conclude this section. Elsa Barkley Brown's frequently quoted proposal of the African-American practice of "gumbo ya ya" (everyone talking at once) as a radically new way for feminists to write history, underlines the need for a relational analysis of racial difference. "Gumbo ya ya" as a method has much to offer feminist history argues Brown, for it eschews western linear, historical narratives in favour of more realist asymmetrical and multiple
stories in simultaneous dialogue (Brown, Reading 22). In 1992 Hire suggested similarly that feminists disassemble the boundaries between black and white women's lives and undertake 'crossover history'. In defense of why black women should abandon the historical recuperation of their foremothers in favor of yet more research on white women, she contended that only by examining each other's history would women 'register meaningful progress in the war against racism, sexism and class oppression'. In any event, she added, 'the time for cutting is past; now let's get busy'.

Postcolonialism and feminist history

Feminist considerations of 'difference' also took place between British, European, Indian, African, and Caribbean scholars with regard to the historical legacy of imperialism. These exchanges formed part of the wider intellectual movement of postcolonial studies during the 1980s and 1990s where new metaphors upon the cultural as opposed to diplomatic and military dimensions of empire-building provided an opportunity for feminists to signal the value of gender to such analyses. In marked contrast to the predominantly experiential readings of difference utilised in African-American women's debates on race, postcolonial feminist analyses have been influenced more by poststructuralism, particularly the work of Edward Said and Michel Foucault. Here, as Himani Banerji remarks, difference is read as a discursive act of colonial power, understood 'not as what people intrinsically are, but what they are ascribed in the context of domination'.

Throughout this discussion I use the term 'postcolonialism' in the sense of a continuous disengagement from colonialism, indicating an ongoing historical dynamic as opposed to the more literal (and inaccurate) sense of the term as the period after colonialism. As will become evident, the legacy of neo-colonialism lives on for many communities, lending the construction of 'new imperial histories' a particular urgency and acuity. As Clare Midyouth identifies in a valuable overview of the field, feminist historians have been productive participants in the debates surrounding gender and imperialism. Initially recuperative research on colonial wives, female missionaries, nurses, travelers and educators successfully challenged the notion that the empire was essentially male enterprise, providing an important corrective to the gender myopia of early Subaltern Studies and of Orientalism. As radical as this work genuinely was, however, concern was soon expressed at the continued Anglocentrism of both the subject matter and the theoretical approaches in those accounts. Jane Haggis, among others, observed that the bulk of this scholarship tended to overlook the substantial racial privileges enjoyed by British and European women in the colonies as well as perpetuating the historical invisibility of indigenous women. Further accounts highlighted in more nuanced ways women's intellectual and political enmeshment with the civilizing aims and mission of empire. As a result, western feminism's complicity with dominant imperial values became a new critical orthodoxy for postcolonial feminist scholars. A flagging text in this regard, Antoinette Burton's Bureads of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture (1996), argued that nineteenth-century British feminists concluded with imperial power by appropriating a racialised discourse that constructed Indian and 'Oriental' women more generally as objects of oppression and pity in need of rescue by their white 'sisters'. In 1992 Kumari Jayawardena, Napur Chaubhuri and Margaret Streefl had also concluded that Western feminist attitudes encompassed a far more 'complex dynamic of complicity and resistance' to imperialist values. These included both the denigration of Indian culture, an important strand of Orientalism that was perfectly compatible with colonial rule and, conversely, support for Indian national liberation.

As Burton reflected in 1993, however, the original intention of Amos and Parmia's essay, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' (1984), was not to generate the desired 'politically accountable historiography of Euro-American women's movements, but rather to make space for histories of black women, women of colour and anti-colonial and nationalist women. Accordingly, the last twenty years have seen the emergence of a prodigious body of work by black and Third World scholars seeking to decolonise Western feminist theory and prioritise difference. With historians of lesbian culture, the politics of the archive and the paucity of available documentary sources have posed particular difficulties for the reconstruction of Third World women's histories. One creative response to this has been to radically redefine conventional understandings of what counts as historical evidence. Thus, innovative use has been made of oral testimonies, indigenous folk cultures, clothing, jewellery and tattoos in African women's history, while domestic architecture has been drawn upon in a recent examination of women's lives in twentieth-century colonial India.

A related response by postcolonial feminists, such as Antoinette Burton's innovative study Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing Home, Home and History in Late Colonial India (2003), has been to augment feminist historians' intrinsic suspicion of the powerful, patriarchal 'archive logic' that naturalises and renders 'official' highly random, fragmented traces of historical experience. 'Feminist historiography cannot be just additive', contends Janaki Nair, 'for it . . . already hampered by the nature of the archive, which disproportionately reflects the interests and concerns of the dominant classes, then the search for fresh "evidence" could obscure the need for a critique of the techniques by which patriarchal remains resilient'. For feminist scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, the discriminatory colonial nature of the official archive is one form that the recovery of the indigenous female subject's voice will always be frustrated. Spivak's acclaimed essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), has become an influential counterpart to Euro-American feminist theories of agency and representation due to its infamously assertive that the subaltern woman cannot speak, or, more accurately, that her speech cannot be heard. Caught in the nineteenth-century context between British colonial and Indian elite discourses on the prohibition of sati (Hindu widow sacrifice), the subject-position of the subaltern woman simply disappeared. Even the most empathetic western theorising will not restore her voice argues Spivak, for such constructions can never escape an 'imperialist subject-constitution, miring epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilisation And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever'. This is not to say (as some have done) that Spivak denies the lived existence or historical agency of the subaltern female. Rather, she contends that the historical and social conditions of representation at
the time allowed her no place from which to speak. Thus, as Gyan Prakash notes, for Spivak the silence of the subaltern woman "marks the limit of historical knowledge."144

For historians such as Ania Loomba and Lata Mani, Spivak's silenced subalterns is unnecessarily pessimistic as well as being uncomfortably evocative of nineteenth-century colonialist discourse (Loomba, Reading 23). Mani's study, Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Saty in Colonial India (1998), attempts to restore the victims of sati to the narrative centre arguing that, while rarely the subject of primary concern, the suffering widow was still the site of conflicting struggles over the nature of Indian society and tradition in ways that "unsettle the image of her as passive, willing or silent."145 As with the queering of feminist history discussed in Part III, Mani's reading strategy is one which seeks to foreground the historical and political conditions of discursive production:

"The issue may not be whether the subaltern can speak so much as whether she can be heard to be speaking in a given set of materials and what, indeed, has been made of her voice by colonial and postcolonial historiography. Reexposing Spivak thus enables us to remain vigilant about the positioning of women in colonial discourse without conceding to colonial discourses what it did not, in fact, achieve - the erasure of women."146

Debates over whether or not, given the nature of the historical archive, it is possible to rehabilitate the voice of the subaltern female at all have raised important issues concerning the nature of historical representation and the colonizing influence of western epistemological frameworks. Nevertheless, feminist narrators of indigenous communities' strategies for survival in an anticolonialist context have continued apace. Recent histories of colonised women and men such as Ruth Roach Pierson's and Nupur Chaudhuri's important collection, Nation, Empire and Colonial Historiography (1999), have queued the analytical dominance of the colorist/postcolonial binary, shifting from a simple focus upon the impact of imperialism to greater awareness of the coterminous influences of regional conflicts or nationalist agendas upon the lives of indigenous women. As Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper pointed out in 1997, scholars should not be writing as if "the culture of the imperial power still sets the standard against which diverse national cultures must measure themselves."147 The ways in which feminists have begun to think beyond the bifurcated colonizer/colonised paradigm so as to further decolonise theory can be illustrated through two main approaches which will be examined briefly here: first, new research agendas that decentre imperialism in favour of analysing the gendered politics of national identity formations and second, feminist histories that have argued for the reciprocal shaping influences of metropolitan and colony.

As Mininali Sinha's comprehensive historiographical summary makes clear, histories of gender and national identity, although not exclusive to black Third World scholarship, have reinforced the analytical significance of difference by asserting that "gender is already always constituted by other forms of difference: such as those of class, race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality as well as of, course, the nation." (Sinha, Reading 24) This scholarship provides powerful global evidence of the diverse and conflicting forms that a fully historicised, fully decolonised reading of feminism can take. Contrary to western feminism's tendency to present itself as somehow transcending national boundaries, Third World scholars have shown that "there has been no feminism ever been autonomous of the national context from which it emerged" (Sinha, Reading 24). Not surprisingly the historical relationship between feminism and nationalism belies any unitary analysis, although certain patterns do emerge such as that of the tension between the ubiquitous female iconography in nationalist discourse and women's thwarted claims for the right to full citizenship.148 Historically, nationalist movements have made extensive use of gendered imagery in which women - their behaviour, dress codes and, quite literally, their bodies - become eulogised as bearers of authentic, national or pre-colonial tradition, as in the previously mentioned contestations over sati or in Muslim debates over the hijab.149 Yet, all too often nationalist discourses have castigated feminism as antithetical to national independence. As Hilary McD. Beckles has observed, in the mulattoist Caribbean construction of the nation, 'radical' feminists were prominent occupants of a discredited community that included Rastafarians, religious fundamentalists, communists, black power charmers and other advocates of an allegedly "unmanly" cause.150 Feminist historians have also shown that where women are involved in militant nationalism the ambiguities of gender norms will always dictate cultural and historical responses. Thus, women have mobilised themselves very successfully in various national political contexts around traditional female symbolism such as motherhood, as in the Argentinean Madres de la Plaza de Mayo of the Sri Lankan Mothers' Front.151 According to Louise Ryan's work on women's involvement in the Irish militant nationalistic campaigns between 1919 and 1923, however, the violent, transgressive female insurgent poses far greater contradictions to heroic accounts of national independence. As women's continued exclusion from Irish republican histories indicates, these narratives remain quintessentially male.152

Postcolonial and feminist scholarship on gender and national identity has long recognized that nations are neither fixed nor original points of historical identity but "imagined communities' whose traditions are reciprocally created and performed."153 In a similar vein, Cooper and Stoler have argued that the single most determining "tension of empire" was the mutually shaping influence of metropolis and colony through which "a grammar of difference was continually and vigilantly crafted as people in colonies refurbished and contested European claims to superiority."154 The influence of indigenous cultures upon the development of imperial policies in London, Paris or The Hague meant that each site, metropolis and colony, was affected by the other in radically constitutive though not equal ways.155 Thus the metropolitan, imperial sense of self-identity was rarely as secure as its public façade appeared to suggest. Instead, as Anne McClintock and Ann Stoler have carefully argued, the racial and sexual values of the European bourgeoisie's order were repeatedly constructed over and against the working classes at home as well as the colonised subjects of Britain (India, French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies).156
Feminist historians such as Burton, Mildpey, Susan Thorne and others, have thus rethought the relational narratives of metropole and colony in important ways exploring the impact of empire ‘at home’. British feminist scholarship, for example, has examined the presence of Asian and black communities in the metropole as well as the impact of imperialism upon the formation of English/British identity, not least in the origins of the nineteenth century women’s movement. Here the work of Mininalini Sinha and Catherine Hall has also been influential in tracing the simultaneity of colonial and indigenous formations of masculinity as indicative of the wider exercise of power relations between the coloniser and the colonised. Sinha’s important work, Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Mongrel’ in the Late Nineteenth Century (1996), illustrates the peripatetic negotiations between colonial and national elite discourses of gender. Hall’s longstanding examination of the interconnected histories of Jamaica and England has similarly revealed how colonial encounters shaped imperial readings of masculinity and, most recently in her Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867 (2002), she develops her influential thesis that English identity and ‘whiteness’ were thoroughly imbicated with the culture of empire. Indeed, although a number of imperatives in the imperialists’ civilising mission, whiteness was a peculiarly volatile category (Hall, Reading 25). As Marilyn Lake has argued in the case of Australian women, settler societies ‘attached special significance to the status and meaning of “whiteness”’ because of their dual identity as both colonisers and, alongside other indigenous peoples, colonised. Racial mixing, the most intimate manifestation of the inter-relatedness of metropole and colony, was the greatest challenge of all to whiteness and, as the pioneering critical work of Catherine Hall and others in this field have shown, a profound threat to the maintenance of imperial authority (Hall, Reading 25).

**Transnational, comparative and global feminist histories**

So far in this employment of black and postcolonial feminist history-writing, we have seen the predominance of narratives structured around the binaries of white/other and coloniser/colonised in order to challenge the racially privileged epistemology of western feminist theory and foster alternative readings of women, feminism and history. Most recently, however, analysts of ‘centres of difference’ have been prompted by a new intellectual desire to build transnational alliances and solidarities between women across national borders and boundaries. The rapid global expansion of technology and communication systems, major demographic shifts due to economic migrations or political diasporas, the collapse of the socialist experiments in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Soviet Union, and the rise of multinational forms of capitalism, have altered our political and intellectual landscape dramatically. Such developments raise a number of urgent theoretical and methodological challenges for feminists at the beginning of the twenty-first century, demanding new formulations around global perspectives in women’s history that can both the radically asymmetrical power relations between nations.

Feminists already have a sound history of organizing internationally around issues such as socialism, sexuality, citizenship rights, health and pacifism. Sanjam Ahluwalia’s study of the transnational dimensions of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century birth control movement, for example, is a good illustration of the extent to which social reform movements have frequently brought together local, national and international forms of knowledge and activism (Ahluwalia and Burton, Reading 26). The developing field of African diaspora studies also indicates great promise for comparative global feminist analysts where in 1995 Rosalyn Terborg- Penn proposed the rudiments of a cross-cultural African feminist theoretical approach that might encompass the experiences of people of African descent throughout the Caribbean, Brazil, the US and Africa itself. The ability to undertake such analytical ‘border crossings’ can just as easily occur between women within a simple continent, of course, for as Assumption Lavrin reminds us, twentieth-century Latin American feminism has demonstrated a ‘strong vocation for internationalism’ as a means to confronting political regimes of immense diversity. According to Ahluwalia, the shift towards more interconnected global histories is a significant theoretical development allowing Third World scholars to interrogate western feminist political strategies and propose fully historicised, context-specific alternatives (Ahluwalia and Burton, Reading 26). Yet it is a theoretical approach fraught with difficulty. Transnational feminist histories require innovative comparative scholarship that neither diminishes ‘difference’ in the name of a falsely universalised feminism nor relies it by taking refuge in relativist platitudes. In her response to Ahluwalia, Antonette Burton argues that the nation can often be an ‘insufficient investigative category’, not least because national boundaries are often a ‘fingering effect of imperial power’, she is equally concerned, however, that in the rush to be fully transnational new forms of discursive colonisation wait just around the corner (Ahluwalia and Burton, Reading 26). How, then, to rethink a feminist history of ‘solidarity across borders’ that is firmly grounded in the local and particular experiences of women? This is the central theoretical challenge for a transnational feminist practice.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s recent rewriting of her classic article ‘Under Western Eyes’ almost twenty years after it was first published, provides a salient case study of the shift in emphasis from, as the title of her book suggests, decolonising theory to practising solidarity (Mohanty, Reading 28). The discursive colonisation of Third World women still continues she explains but, confronted with the dominance of global capitalism and the increasing oppressively values, it is time to move on from critique to reconstruction. What Mohanty refers to as the ‘feminist solidary’ or ‘comparative feminist studies’ model provides a useful agenda for future feminist historical considerations of ‘difference’ as she observes:

**differences are never just “differences”. In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determined.**

Mohanty’s response to this challenge is to advocate a historical materialist analysis of the marginalised communities of women from the Third World/South.
women form an epistemologically privileged site of reflection on difference and solidarity, she argues, because black feminism provides the 'inclusive paradigm and expansive vision for thinking about universal social justice' as well as denormalising the western viewpoint (Machaty, Reading 28). Cheryl Johnson-Odim's study of twenty-first-century Nigerian women's anticolonial protest movements offers just one illustration of what a fully contextualised, Indigenous reading of women's activism might look like, which may or may not come under the name of 'feminism' (Johnson-Odim, Reading 27). Scholars such as Susan Stanford Friedman and Mary E. John have also called for further comparative work on women across the Third World/South as a means of displacing western hegemony as the 'default frame of reference'.

As I think the above indicates, the prodigious growth of alternative histories by black and Third World scholars has much transformed the theoretical landscape of feminist history since Audre Lorde first wrote in 1979 that 'the oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries... but that does not mean it is identical within those differences' (Lorde, Reading 21). 'Difference' has proved to be a potent signifier for the inequitable relationships between women and binary narratives of white women/women of colour, coloniser/colonised or First World/Third World women have done much to expose and defy the intellectual imperialism of western feminist thought. Yet these models are not without their limitations. As Susan Stanford Friedman has pointed out, 'white' and 'western' are not unitary categories either, but all too often the heterogeneity of non-white women has been premised on a monolithic construction of whiteness. An array of new theoretical challenges face feminists as they move now towards the production of increasingly global, transnational forms of history-writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Hinarani Banneryj reminds us, in the attempt to reconceptualise feminist solidarity across borders 'we need to be vigilant that our critical histories do not themselves end up by creating reified subjects and narrational closures'.

Afterword
I have chosen to conclude this Reader with an Afterword in the form of a 2004 retrospective on 'Feminism’s History' by Joan Scott, an essay that raises some thought-provoking reflections on the equivocal nature of feminist history's journey from the academic borderlands into the disciplinary mainstream. This is perhaps something that could only have been written from within a US context where feminist scholarship has enjoyed greater acceptance than just about anywhere else in the academic world. Nevertheless, a consideration of feminist history's 'politics of location' and the losses and gains to be made from institutional assimilation has much to say about its future critical potential. Put simply, how possible is it to continue the project of transformation, of reimagining and reworking history, from the 'safer terrains of the centre'? It is surely no coincidence that throughout this summary of feminist historiography much critical questioning and innovative analysis has come from those not yet in possession of the centre-ground. The black feminist theorist bell hooks has argued that marginality is neither optional nor something to surrender in haste as part of the move to the centre. It is, instead, a condition to remain in because it necessitates a critical stance of resistance: 'I am located at the margins', she writes, 'I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site for resistance - as a location of radical openness and possibility'.

I would argue myself that the prodigious development and growth of feminist history over the past three decades has been due to precisely just such a location of marginality, not necessarily as a physical space (although it has been and still is this for many feminist scholars), but as a theoretical position. As we look to the future of feminist history in the twenty-first century, it becomes clear that it can never inhabit the historical mainstream in any epistemological sense, for that would be a disavowal of its fundamentally subversive practice. What characterises feminism's history and its perpetual interrogation of dominant categories is, as Scott notes, its 'radical refusal to settle down' and to call anywhere 'home' (Scott, Reading 29). To this sentiment I would add Diane Elam's observation on the need to write women's history in the future anterior tense 'which doesn't claim to know in advance what it is that women can do and be'. This is the radical openness of feminist history's future that accepts that in rewriting and reterritorialising traditional history it must look to its own transformations and its own reimaginations, aware that the very best we produce will, in the future, be seen as 'not having been good enough' 'Passion, after all', as Scott argues, 'thrives on the pursuit of the not-yet-known' (Scott, Reading 29).

Notes
1 Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'The Social Relations of the Scene: Methodological Implications of Women's History', Signs, 1, 1/4 (Summer, 1976): 509
2 See the 'Guide to Further Reading: General Theoretical Surveys of Feminist History' at the end of this Reader for details
3 A selection is always a process of exclusion as well as inclusion and there are many innovative feminist historical studies and approaches that I have not been able to incorporate, such as psychoanalytical and autobiographical approaches to writing feminist history. See for example Carole Shabazz, Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives (London: Virage, 1986); Liz Stanley, The Autobiographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) and Lyndal Roger, Oranges and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Rebellion in Early Modern Europe (London: Routledge, 1994).
New Genealogy in Twenty First Century Lesbian Studies', *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 30 (2006): My thanks to Laura Dao for allowing me to see a copy of this article before publication.


100 Ford, *Speculating on Scrapbooks, Sex and Desire*, p. 125.

101 Grafton, '"Feminists, Feminists and Sexual Outlaw": Lesbianism and British History', p. 179.


104 Callahan, "The Gender Cloak", p. 21.


107 Mohanty, *Cartographies of Struggle*, p. 49.


111 Ruth Roach Peterson, *Colonization and Canadian Women's History*, *Journal of Women's History*, 4:2 (Fall, 1992): 134-56. A similar accusation could be made, of course, about the dominant anglophone of British scholarship with regard to the Celtic "Wing" of Wales, Scotland and Ireland.


121 E. Frances White, *Africa On My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism*, in Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Stohl (eds)


134 See also Neill and Sabina Haq. "Women's Oppositional Discourse in a Reconfigured History", in Mignolo (ed) Gender and Imperialism, pp. 45–75.

135 To cite: Neill and Sabina Haq. "Women's Oppositional Discourse in a Reconfigured History", in Mignolo (ed) Gender and Imperialism, pp. 45–75.


PART I

Bringing the female subject into view