

# Oxford Handbooks Online

## **Women, Gender, and American History**

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The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter analyzes the methods, sources, and relationship between women's and gender history, arguing American women's and gender history is its own interpretation of American history, focused on how ideas about women and gender shaped people's lives as they participated in the processes of migration, colonialism, trade, warfare, artistic production, community-building, and political mobilization. It explores the field as an integrated one that embraces tensions between women's history and gender history, as well as intersectional analysis and new understandings of sexuality, to consider who counts as a "woman" and for what purpose. The field challenges the conventional chronology of the United States and the primacy of the nation as a unit of history. The field's archive innovation excavates histories hidden in plain sight and scrutinizes silences in the historical record, challenging the nature of historical evidence and remapping what counts in historical interpretation of the past.

Keywords: gender, women, United States, America, intersectionality, sexuality, transnationalism

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Making dolls in the Manual Industries Division of the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company, near Isla Verde, Puerto Rico, 1947.

Louise Rosskam, Office of Information for Puerto Rico Collection. Courtesy of the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, CUNY.

HALF of the people who have lived in North America and the United States have been women. Like the pictured seamstress stitching dolls in 1947 Puerto Rico, they lived, worked, and died at the center of families and communities. Like her, many dwelled in cities. Others populated isolated outposts and small villages. Their stories—of work and recreation, political struggle and religious inspiration, mobility and stasis—are at the center of the history of

North America. Yet, as with Puerto Rican seamstresses laboring under a US-backed investment program called Operation Bootstrap, uncovering and interpreting those stories has required a long evolution in historians' methods and a revolution in the politics of scholarship.

Generations of women's and gender historians built the field presented in the *Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*. Remembering her early efforts, the scholar Gerda Lerner recalled, "The contempt in which work on women in history was held in the 1960s not only represented career obstacles for the few of us who ventured into that field, but also limited our training and our command of methodology." Lerner was part of a generation of women historians who confronted profound structural obstacles to placing women at the center of understanding the American past, as well as outright hostility from colleagues for their efforts to bring women's history into the academy. As pioneers of a new field, this generation trained themselves and each other within university departments that were teaching history as defined and dominated by men. They encountered archives designed to record men's experiences. Initially equipped with what Lerner called "the tools developed for doing the history of men," they pioneered alternative methodologies and perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

**(p. 2)** This book continues their innovations, by presenting new chronologies, transnational themes, and the integration of histories about diverse women's lives with the history of ideas about gender and their consequences. Individuals who lived as women are the focus and anchor of the chapters in this *Handbook*. At the same time, contributors explore how one of the key struggles these individuals contended with was their gender—who counted as a woman, and for whose sake? Such an understanding reframes the North American past, down to its basic contours and root sources, in ways

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that at times intersect with and at other times diverge from an American history long oriented around the nation-state and punctuated by turning points of wars and elections. American women's and gender history is not a subfield of American history that enlivens the larger truth, but rather its own interpretation, focused on how ideas about women and gender shaped people's lives as they participated in the processes of migration, colonialism, trade, warfare, artistic production, and community-building.

Women's and gender history challenges the conventional chronology of US history because focusing on women's lives challenges the primacy of the nation as the unit of history. For example, white women's increasing participation in the paid labor force in the twentieth century, a hallmark of the modern United States, rested on the work of other women, often migrant women of color, to clean their clothes, cook their food, nurse their parents, and nurture their children. The availability of such intimate services depended on the migration of women from Latin America, Africa, and Asia to the United States. A transnational approach, then, best comprehends the lives of women and the operation of ideas about gender and caring work that undergird the modern US labor system.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on gender and women likewise excavates a host of new sources and archives to illuminate the past, often through the lens of sexuality.<sup>3</sup> For example, European men who traded and traveled in seventeenth-century North America depended on personal and sexual relationships with Indian women for their businesses and their very lives. Where once historians scrutinized imperial regulations to understand the fur trade economy, now they must also understand the coerced and consensual sexual relationships that facilitated trade, recorded fleetingly in passed-down oral accounts, priests' correspondence, material culture, and birth records.<sup>4</sup>

The chapters in the *Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History* incorporate the voices of multiple generations of scholars and the wide variety of approaches they use to understand women and gender in the past, many of which come from other fields in the social sciences and humanities. Perhaps as a result, the essays do not map onto familiar assertions that the continent's history flowed from enslavement to freedom, from constraint to liberty, from discrimination to rights. Some scholars view the history of women and gender in pessimistic terms, identifying a "patriarchal equilibrium" that has reasserted male power over female lives time and again.<sup>5</sup> Contributors to this *Handbook* see a more varied story, shaped by differences within and across communities and often surprising patterns of change and continuity in women's and men's lives.

### (p. 3) **Methods, Sources, Perspectives**

Writers and readers have long been interested in women who came before, and they have enlisted their imaginations to understand saints, queens, and great-great-grandmothers. For scholars, too, connections between past and present have motivated historical inquiry. In the case of women's history, feminist commitment to understanding the origins of female subordination, as well as a dedication to celebrating those who rose above their female condition, provided an engine for scholarship, as Lerner's classic title *The*

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*Majority Finds Its Past* suggests. With their own connections to feminism, early academic historians of women were interested in female social activists of the past, such as abolitionists and suffragists.<sup>6</sup> As part of historians' turn to social history and histories from the "bottom up," they also focused attention on the private aspects of women's daily lives perceived as ahistorical, from reproduction, to childrearing, to domestic labor, to friendship and love.<sup>7</sup> Method and theory merged, as an essential part of their mission was to challenge value-laden divisions between scholars and activists, within professional ranks, and in regard to what kinds of sources "counted."

One early insight was deceptively simple: that scholarly history was specifically male, rather than universally human. Not only were women's lives in the past different from men's, but also the research questions raised by women's experiences diverged from those previously deemed the proper focus of history. In Regency England, Jane Austen had famously skewered the masculine bias of what counted as history as "quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all."<sup>8</sup> But a new generation pressed further, noting that kings and wars depended on women's work. George Washington's rebel troops needed female labor, even if he wanted those women marching out of sight, with the baggage and in the alleys. Furthermore, women's historians pointed out, military campaigns and politicians depended on ideas about the supposed "natural" relationships between men and women to achieve their power. Washington's reputation as "father of his country" was designed to make the brand-new office of president seem natural and familial, though he physically produced no children of his own.

Another key insight was that "women" were not and are not all the same. Women scholars of color especially called attention to white colleagues' own blind spots and assumptions about universality. "With a few noteworthy exceptions," recalled the pioneering historian of African American women's history Darlene Clark Hine, "it was only Black women scholars who insisted that Black women's experiences, precisely because of their race, gender, and class, were often different and distinct in fundamental ways from those of Black men and white women."<sup>9</sup> Pronouncements about "the status of women" were meaningless given the influence of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identification, religion, and able-bodiedness/disability on women's lives. Their experiences and identities required intersectional analysis, meaning the acknowledgment of differences within groups and the understanding that overlapping social hierarchies shaped those (p. 4) differences.<sup>10</sup> Think of jazz music, created by artists improvising individually but also performing in relation to each other, said the historian Elsa Barkley Brown, to understand that "white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do."<sup>11</sup>

Women's historians theorized about gender, but gender history as a distinct field gained prominence in the 1980s, when Joan W. Scott's highly influential 1986 article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" spearheaded a dynamic and sometimes contentious debate over the relationship between gender and women's history. Scott defined gender as a language of power linked to perceived differences between men and

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women.<sup>12</sup> This language of power, she observed, was used not only to discriminate against women, but also to support a variety of structures that were not overtly about relationships between men and women. Proponents of Manifest Destiny used female pronouns and feminine imagery to discuss potential territories not because Native people were all women, but rather because casting them as feminine made their supposed inferiority and ability to be physically overpowered by a masculine conqueror seem natural and inevitable.<sup>13</sup> In time, other historians identified variant power relationships and societies that practiced gender distinctions differently than Scott's oppositional male-female binary.<sup>14</sup> The close but sometimes divergent development of women's and gender history was evident in 1989 with the establishment of the *Journal of Women's History* and *Gender & History*, leading journals with titles that each signaled a specific intellectual orientation.

Many women's historians worried that gender history would supplant women's history. They cautioned against a gender history that, in making women's history a subcategory alongside the history of men, might once again make men's historical experiences ascendant. As Alice Kessler-Harris warned, a gender history that did not challenge "the normative view of the world through the eyes of men" risked ignoring the political power of legitimizing women as thinkers—both as historical actors and modern historians—and ultimately killing off the energy and urgency that had created the field to begin with.<sup>15</sup> Concern over losing that political edge affected the reception of gender history, or as Laura Lee Downs asked, "If 'Woman' is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?"<sup>16</sup>

Scholars addressed these concerns by thinking about the relationship between women's and gender history in different ways. Some proposed gender as one of several categories *within* women's history, rather than the other way around.<sup>17</sup> Others insisted that focusing on gender brought more women into history as important actors. It was not a coincidence that some of the leading scholars on the history of marriage, international adoption, or sex-reassignment wrote their first books on women's history topics.<sup>18</sup> Their professional trajectories reflected enduring links between scholarly interest in women's lives and scholarly interest in gendered power in the United States and beyond.

Gender history did not replace women's history. Instead what emerged from the tensions between women's and gender history was a "big tent" of practitioners and areas of inquiry.<sup>19</sup> By the twenty-first century, American women's history courses across the United States began to include "gender" in their titles or course descriptions. History (p. 5) departments sought applicants specializing in "women's and gender history," looking for scholars who were able to teach a range of overlapping women's, gender, and sexuality courses. The *Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*, likewise, employs a "big tent" recognition that "women's and gender history" operates as an integrated field that is fueled by the confluences and tensions of these related categories. The authors employ the category of woman to examine the gendered history of North America and the United States, even while probing the boundaries of the category "woman." They uncover the structures of law, governance, and knowledge that

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underpinned gender patterns. Sometimes, such patterns transgressed the female-male binary based on sexual difference; at other times, they shored it up. As a result, “doing gender” does not mean giving “men” and “women” equal time and equal analytical weight. Instead, it means examining the history of masculinity within the framework of women’s and gender history and considering the experiences of those outside a two-sex model. A volume organized exclusively under the rubric of either women’s history or gender history would undoubtedly look different.

No rethinking of categories would be possible without a revolution in research itself, and women’s and gender historians are archive innovators. Faced with a familiar claim that “the sources aren’t there,” they have found traces of women’s actions and decisions in court cases, government hearings, and runaway slave notices. Often, they work with sources created about idealized women who never existed in the flesh. Legal opinions invoked the “natural destiny” of “women”; poems waxed nostalgic about “mothers”; satires lampooned lusty “female” sexuality; in each case, authors perpetuated fictional tropes. Part of the craft, therefore, has been to pierce the impression that such sources describe “truth” while looking for the ways that those same sources created real-life consequences. The other part of the craft has been to look for new kinds of sources, including family papers, oral histories, and material culture.

Scrutinizing silences in the historical record, from the inattention to enslaved women’s opinions to the suppression of Indian women’s involvement in border diplomacy, scholars have challenged the nature of historical evidence and called for rigorous attention to its absences. If histories fail to hinge on women’s lives, they suggest, the archive is the problem, because its silences are deliberate, the result of men and institutions using their records to consolidate their power. Alternatively, others insist, the archive can be a solution. Instead of writing an intellectual history of equality from the essays of white male Enlightenment authors, craft it from the sermons of black women preachers, or the international translations of the female-created health manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.<sup>20</sup> Archival innovation delivers a good shake to prevailing ideas about what “counts” as intellectual history, or for that matter, the history of technology or the environment.

Scholarly research on American women’s and gender history resists a single narrative. The field’s explorations of empire and boundary crossing, workers and households, sexualities and the body, culture and commerce, and activism all challenge any singular subject or cause of historical change. Even that most classic topic of historical inquiry, war, with women and gender at the center, reveals both enduring links (p. 6) between frontline and homefront struggles and the vivid truth that conflicts began long before and continued long after the fighting. American women’s and gender history does not throw out chronology; it reframes events to reveal deeper patterns of change and continuity.

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## Empire, Boundary Crossing, and the Borders of Belonging

Take, for example, events in the seventeenth-century Southwest. In 1673, seven-year-old Juana was a vulnerable child, kidnapped by Navajos from her Pueblo Indian mother and Spanish father. By the time she died at age eighty, however, her extensive social and kin ties had earned her an estate of two ranches, dozens of animals, and substantial personal property. Her surprising economic transformation pointed to the ways that colonial (and US) imperial encounters in North America pivoted around ideas about how women and men should behave and interact. Imperial travelers, national policymakers, and Native peoples often wielded ideas about what was natural and what was cultural as tools to conquer or contain others. Social and sexual relationships were the proving ground of political power. Emerging in an ad hoc fashion in the earliest encounters, rules about proper relations of men and women were institutionalized by the federal state. At the same time, communities and families used their own gender ideas to decide who moved and who stayed, who accommodated and who resisted. Many times, these two arenas—the formal state on the one hand and families and communities on the other—intersected as women and men mobilized gender ideologies to seize power within institutions as diverse as the military, political parties, or churches.

The law served many of these interests. Formal codification of slavery depended on making the maternal line the most legally significant. Laws about who could marry whom marked the boundaries of national citizenship and the physical borders of the United States itself. Laws about military service, and the financial and political rewards of risking one's life, opened opportunities to specific groups of men and the women legally attached to them. In this regard, the history of nation-building and expansion was connected to shifting ideas about manhood and masculinity and the authority that some men wielded over women and other men.

But culture and fantasy also worked to encourage some alliances and forbid others, to shore up some men's power and subordinate the desires of others. Rigid ideas about race emerged within cultural contact zones in which men and women interacted over decades. All along the way, women's lives as border-dwellers and border-crossers shaped communities and politics. Female captives and refugees, from Native Americans to Spanish colonial girls to enslaved Africans, all experienced lives shaped by movement across boundaries of state and empire as much as constriction within them.

### **(p. 7) Workers, Families, and Households**

Sarah Bagley knew exactly why she and other young white women left New Hampshire farms to work in Massachusetts factories in the 1830s: "We must have money; a father's debts are to be paid, an aged mother to be supported, a brother's ambition to be aided."<sup>21</sup> For everyone in North America, the fluctuating border between "home" and "work" sat at the core of economic life. Indeed, the English term "economy" comes from Greek words

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for “household” and “management,” suggesting the historical centrality of women’s labor, even as American capitalism has often obscured its value. From the earliest colonial encounters to the rapidly developing “gig” economies of the twenty-first century, the relationship between so-called productive and reproductive labor determined the development of labor flows, economies, and ideas about trade. Colonial economies and indigenous families owed their existence to determining whose labor could be counted on, whose labor coerced, and whose labor rewarded. Over time, evolving ideas about men and women established the terms of economic calculations, often through expanding or restricting membership in a family, household, or other collective.

In the case of unfree women, reproductive labor was part of violent coercion, and their bodies were employed both in field work and as vehicles for commodified investment and future slaves. The diverse slave trades of North America—across the Atlantic, around the coast, or deep in Indian Country—always involved the sexual traffic in women. For the women trapped by that trade, intimate family connection was a source of strength that was always vulnerable to the financial calculations of owners.

Those same owners simultaneously claimed that within their own families, the work of cooking, cleaning, and bearing and caring for children, was not work at all, but rather an expression of care. By the middle of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of people worked independently for pay rather than within a shared household enterprise. Market exchanges upended older ideas about work’s value, and an influential ideology of “domesticity” connected middle-class women to homes that were supposed to represent the opposite of the values of the economy.

The tension between unpaid reproductive labor and paid work continued to mold women’s struggles for rights and protections at work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Employers, masters, and male-dominated labor unions defined the work that women did as unskilled—an extension of their “natural” duties within families—either to justify lower wages for women (in the case of employers) or to shore up jobs and higher salaries for men (in the case of many labor unions). In a cycle that repeated over generations, the labor force was divided by gender and race as government policies and private companies channeled women into jobs deemed culturally appropriate for their status. In response, some women fought to enter new sectors of paid employment, while others—especially women of color—insisted on their right to work within their families, rather than for pay. The developing global economy, in turn, benefited from (p. 8) the expectation that families could tap into networks of women to wash, cook, and care for children, the sick, and the elderly, without pay and with fewer supports than in other wealthy countries. The household—in all of its new forms—still bears the burden of invisible manager of the economy.

## Sexualities, Identities, and the Body

“Ex-GI Becomes Blond Beauty” read the 1952 front-page headline of the *New York Times* article on the American Christine Jorgensen’s gender reassignment treatment, or sex-change operation, in Denmark. Jorgensen funneled her celebrity toward a career as an entertainer, and sought to become a wife. When she applied for a marriage license, however, the city clerk of New York rejected the application because Jorgensen’s birth certificate identified her as male, even though her passport identified her as a woman and her physician provided a letter confirming her sex as a woman.<sup>22</sup> Her legal dilemma raised the key historical question: What did it mean to have a body classified as female or male, and were there other options?

In North America, gender expression and identity have, in different circumstances, conformed to or challenged two “norms” that many claimed to be universal and fundamental: a two-sex model of humans as either male or female, and heterosexuality. Some American Indian groups have long accepted “third” and “fourth” gender expressions, and the historical record is interspersed with accounts of intersex individuals and gender crossing. Erotic affection and intimacy between people of the same gender likewise existed from the continent’s earliest encounters. Yet for much of North American history, those who challenged gender conventions associated with a two-sex model, including sexual expression, faced stigma and punishment.

In these and a host of other ways, political power worked through intimate relationships and childbirth, bringing the force of governments, courts, and churches into women’s daily experience of their bodies. Sexual violence, laws prohibiting interracial and same-sex relationships, and controls on women’s reproduction helped establish and maintain white male supremacy and class hierarchy in North America. Each served as scaffolding to slavery, Native American removal, Jim Crow, and immigration restrictions.

Americans struggled to gain control of their own sexuality and gender identity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, various women recalibrated ideas about male and female sexuality in the expanding print culture world of books, pamphlets, and periodicals. Female-bodied people lived as husbands and fathers, and male-bodied people presented themselves as women, in order to legitimize same-sex intimacies and/or to express gender variant identities. By the twentieth century, some Americans also sought medical procedures to affirm their gender identity. They challenged opposition to interracial and same-sex marriage and family formation in the courts and the realm of popular opinion. Many women and girls wrestled with reporting sexual (p. 9) violence when popular beliefs and legal practice questioned their credibility and morality. Others pursued reproductive justice that encompassed a wide range of claims to personal autonomy. For women of color pushing back against state-sponsored sterilization, this meant rights to have as many or as few children as a woman wanted. For married women facing laws prohibiting contraception or husbands reluctant to limit pregnancies, it meant legal and affordable birth control and abortion.

## Culture, Commerce, and Religion

As Shirley Owens stood with the three other young African American singers who made up the Shirelles and asked a lover “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” in 1960, her performance expressed personal emotion and social anxieties about female sexuality. The four women’s sleek hair, neat attire, and measured movements challenged centuries of white sexualization of African American women; simultaneously this sexualization made them acceptable cultural messengers of these anxieties to whites.<sup>23</sup> If the body inhabited one expression of gender, culture—in all its forms—expressed others. For herself and for the teenaged audience who purchased her records, Owens captured the great ambivalence surrounding women as producers and consumers of culture.

From early on, the politics of consumption were frequently tangled in misunderstandings over ideas about gender, as when Indian women insisted on playing a central part in trade diplomacy, to the confusion of European men who considered diplomacy men’s domain. Legal structures governing commercial exchanges also rested on ideas about men, women, and the relationships between them. Early British-American law deemed married women “covered” by their husbands, and therefore ineligible to sign contracts. French, Dutch, and Spanish legal systems, in contrast, recognized married partners as independent financial actors, and business culture developed different patterns in regions influenced by them. From the nineteenth century onward, new commercial industries—from credit agencies to insurance companies to grocery stores—institutionalized specific gender ideals, often creating female dependence. The market, like all products of culture, has never been gender-neutral.

Yet within widely variable cultural expressions, women found purpose, community, and power that often eluded them in the structures of the state, the professions, or the corporation. Deprived of economic clout as producers, women seized public power as consumers, organizing boycotts and flexing the power of the purse. Denied the sense of service and purpose of fighting in the military, they found leadership and mission within religious communities, traveling far from the confines of home in the interest of spreading the word of God. Although from one angle, evangelical religion, commercial entertainment, and corporate advertising are highly patriarchal and were frequently deployed to silence and manipulate women, from the perspective of women themselves, these forms were flexible and rich in potential meaning.

**(p. 10)** Culture also offered collective experience for women, and in collective action, they articulated ideas about fairness and women’s proper influence. From churches, black women pressed for economic justice and physical security in a climate of Jim Crow at the opening of the twentieth century. Within twenty-first century public high schools, Muslim girls donned headscarves to assert that Islam and modest dress were just as “All-American” as was sexually explicit, and often misogynistic, popular music.

### Activism

In 1972, the US Congresswoman Patsy Takemoto Mink helped to author and pass Title IX, the groundbreaking legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded educational institutions. Mink's advocacy of Title IX and other legislative efforts were shaped by her overlapping encounters with sexism, racism, and classism in the United States as a Japanese American lawyer from Hawai'i. For her legislation, as for earlier generations' activism, the meaning of "woman" was a social identity around which individuals mobilized to achieve liberal, radical, and conservative agendas. Neither that identity nor the linked activism has been uniform.

The revolutionary moment that swept across Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century set the stage for a revolution in public engagement and new ideas about individuals' and groups' "rights" relative to one another. One strand of this activism pursued fuller protection for the rights of a citizen. Another strand sought redefinition of family law, from one that secured a white man's power over his wife, children, and slaves to one that recognized white women's and people of color's claims to their own bodies and children.

For many, women's political activism falls under a broad understanding of feminism, a movement taking multiple forms that at its core challenges gender hierarchies. Some feminist activists concentrated on sexual relationships, challenging the idea that a heterosexual couple, under the dominance of a man, deserved preeminent cultural approval and legal support. For others, economic inequality, stemming from practices that lowered women's wages relative to men's and policies that denied women of color financial safety nets for their children, was the most pernicious. Conservative women, by contrast, tied the endurance of such hierarchies to their feminine identity.

Women's activism repeatedly demonstrated power hierarchies and differences among them. Women's multiracial antislavery activism did not eliminate white women reformers' racial prejudices toward black colleagues. Late-nineteenth-century organizations leading the fight for woman suffrage largely excluded black members and, as an argument for the vote, characterized white women as "civilizers" of colonized peoples. Some strands of feminism have vocally rejected trans-women as women. White feminist campaigns for full citizenship rights have ignored the exclusion of immigrant women and sexual minorities from US citizenship, and have at times failed to (p. 11) acknowledge African American women's disfranchisement and Puerto Rican and indigenous women's efforts to obtain national independence.

Activists have employed diverse strategies to challenge power structures, but also to uphold them. Some women reformers invoked beliefs about women's "natural" role as mothers and moral superiority to soften opposition to their public activism, but so too did conservative women to oppose woman suffrage, deny other women government and reproductive health services, and fuel nativism, white supremacy, anticommunism, and isolationism. Activists strategically turned to the global stage to connect local efforts to

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transnational networks and movements: black and white antislavery and woman suffrage advocates crossed the Atlantic to find common cause with British counterparts; Latinas recalibrated women's rights as human rights in Pan-American organizations; and low-paid immigrant women advanced economic justice through alliance with women laborers in other nations. Even if they did not use the language of "intersectionality," those facing intersecting sexual, race, and class hierarchies employed distinct strategies to demand gender and racial justice. Sexual minorities used the language of civil rights at home and human rights abroad to press for greater sexual expression and protections. Low-income women of color framed their resistance against employment discrimination and exclusionary social welfare provisions as a struggle for not only economic but also racial justice.

## War and Transformation

During the military struggle of the American Revolution, Konwatsi'tsiaienni, known also as Molly Brant, helped secure the Iroquois League's allegiance to the British, thereby supporting a long-standing alliance. When the victorious United States claimed Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) homelands as part of its spoils of war, Brant's alliance offered her people a physical place of refuge, but only if they moved to a new entity forming north of the US border in Canada. Brant's story of prewar alliance-making and postwar compromises offers a new narrative of wartime experience. More broadly, the histories of women draw attention to the fact that wars often punctuated long-standing transformations, exposing political and cultural borders that had already shifted the terrain on which women lived. As turning points, they were rooted in events that began long before official violence commenced and reverberated for decades of consequences.

The chaos and upheaval of war demanded that women take up new duties, but also opened possibilities for women to seize new chances, with lasting consequences. During the Civil War, enslaved women fled their owners in unprecedented numbers, forcing the Union army to create a refugee program and bringing the question of emancipation directly to the federal government. At the same time, individuals who were raised female traded one set of clothing, relationships, and expectations for others, not only "passing" as men to fight but also embarking on new lives and identities after the war in western territories conquered by US soldiers in the late nineteenth century.

**(p. 12)** All wars, like most political conflicts in American history, drew on gendered images to support their ideologies. During World War II, the Office of War Information encouraged women to work in munitions factories with posters that suggested both their can-do capability and Hollywood-inspired glamour. At the height of the Cold War, women in sexual relationships with other women were condemned for making the United States vulnerable to communist infiltration. The upheavals of war, and the overt challenges they posed to gender norms, also revealed how fragile and changeable those norms were. During the Civil War, the loss of so many southern men to Confederate battlefields put pressure on free women at home to adopt "masculine" roles. At the same time, the

physical destruction of families and economies exposed how much effort had previously gone into maintaining those roles—effort that was no longer available. On other fronts and in every war, women and men found themselves unable to act according to their own ideas about proper gender ideals.<sup>24</sup>

## Women and Gender at the Margins and Intersections

The Puerto Rican seamstress at the opening of this chapter entered the historical archive as a subject for the camera of Louise Rosskam, a middle-class Jewish photographer from the US mainland. Rosskam was one of a cadre of white women, including Dorothea Lange, who worked for the federal government as documentary photographers during the 1930s and 1940s. While Lange's famous dustbowl images documented poverty among southern migrants, Rosskam's photojournalism juxtaposed images of poverty with ones of industrial development. Her body of work advances a challenge to the analytical tools of women's and gender historians: What can we see, what do we think we can see, and what silences are woven into available archives? Rosskam's photograph highlights the repetitive, mechanized nature of the Puerto Rican needlework industry at the center of the United States' expanding export economy, but its orderly, clean image masks the reality of harsh working conditions, dangerous chemicals, low wages, and conflicts with husbands and fathers over finances. Rosskam approached the camera as a tool for social justice, but her framing bolstered the United States' claim to be a benevolent modernizing force.<sup>25</sup> After several generations of scholarship, the problem of silences in the archive remains one of the central themes guiding women's and gender history.

A second main theme—how intersectional identities shaped individual and collective experience—is advanced by the racial politics of twentieth-century North America that caught up Puerto Rican women such as the one in Rosskam's image. For seamstresses in a US colony, and for the many who journeyed to the US mainland at midcentury, racial and gender landscapes shifted with migration. They left behind a society that used an array of color categories (*mulata/o*, *morena/o*, *café con leche*, *blanca/o*, *negra/o colorao*) (p. 13) linked to a tacit hierarchy, and entered a rigid biracial system that treated most as racial inferiors.<sup>26</sup> Transnational histories of women, therefore, open a new angle on the linked scholarship of race and gender by emphasizing that markers of privilege or subordination were situational, not universal, in a single person's life.

The *Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History's* integration of women's and gender history showcases the range and sweep of topics that generations of scholars have crafted through pathbreaking methods, sources, and perspectives. Its analyses compel historians to ask: What gets defined as the center of historical inquiry, and who is left to the margins? Its stories of real women's lives demand recognition that who counts as a "woman," and for what purpose, itself has a long and thorny history that has shaped relations among women as much as those between women and men. Finally, its sources demonstrate how deeply women's and gender history is about rethinking the archive.

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While some may worry that “the cost of mainstreaming women’s history may well be to diminish the power of gender as an analytic category,” we believe the field’s crosscutting effects rather open up the study of North America.<sup>27</sup>

### Notes:

(1.) Gerda Lerner, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

(2.) Studies examining these transnational labor flows include Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

(3.) In 1988, John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman published the highly influential synthetic *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row). For an examination of transnational approaches, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “Transnational Sex and U.S. History,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1273–86.

(4.) Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounters in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Sylvia Van Kirk, “‘The Custom of the Country’: An Examination of Fur Trade Marriage Practices,” in *Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 481–511; Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

(5.) Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

(6.) Classic examples of this scholarship include Gerda Lerner’s *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973); Anne Firor Scott and Andrew M. Scott, *One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975); Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

(7.) Ellen Carol DuBois, “The Last Suffragist: An Intellectual and Political Autobiography,” in *Woman Suffrage and Woman’s Rights*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: NYU Press,

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1998), 2-3; Linda Gordon, "U.S. Women's History," in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 262-64; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74; Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29; Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Nancy F. Cott, "Passionless: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 219-36.

(8.) Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 104.

(9.) Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (LM: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xxvi.

(10.) Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-99; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-74. See also articles by Robin D. G. Kelley, Tamar W. Carroll, Dayo F. Gore, Marlon M. Bailey, L. H. Stallings, and Sherie Randolph, as well as Higginbotham's response, in the spring 2017 *Signs* special edition examining the legacy of Higginbotham's influential article on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication.

(11.) Elsa Barkeley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 297-98. Foundational monographs on the history of women of color that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s include Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church: 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Valerie Matsumoto, *Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California, 1919-1982* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Huping Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Theda

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Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Cultural Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

(12.) Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1067.

(13.) Scott, "Gender," 1069–70, 1073; Joanne Meyerowitz, "A History of 'Gender,'" *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2008): 1347. For Manifest Destiny, see Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Key early cultural histories on women and gender include Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susan M. Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

(14.) Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (November 2008): 558–83.

(15.) Alice Kessler-Harris, "Do We Still Need Women's History?," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 15 (December 7, 2007): B6.

(16.) Laura Lee Downs, "If 'Woman' Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?: Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 2 (April 1993): 414–37.

(17.) Gerda Lerner and Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Graduate Training in U.S. Women's History: A Conference Report* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989), 14; Kessler-Harris, "Do We Still Need Women's History?"

(18.) For example, both Laura Briggs and Catherine Ceniza Choy, whose first books examine women, gender, and US empire, wrote second books on international adoption. Joanne Meyerowitz followed her first book on working-class women in Chicago with a history of transsexuality. Nancy Cott, an author of several women's history books, prepared a book on the history of marriage in the United States. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835*; Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of

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(19.) Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein, "The Big Tent of U.S. Women's and Gender History: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (2012): 793-817.

(20.) Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, eds., *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2007); Mia E. Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels across Borders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

(21.) Sarah Bagley, "Voluntary?" *Voice of Industry*, September 18, 1845.

(22.) Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 51, 58-62, 73-76, 79.

(23.) Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 84-85, 95-96.

(24.) On the problem of masculinity "crises," see Mary Louise Roberts, "Beyond 'Crisis' in Understanding Gender Transformation," *Gender & History* 28, no. 2 (August 2016): 358-66.

(25.) Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 207; Laura Katzman and Beverly W. Brannan, *Re-viewing Documentary: The Photographic Life of Louise Rosskam* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011), 24-25, 105; Eileen J. Suárez Findlay, *We Are Left without a Father Here: Masculinity, Domesticity, and Migration in Postwar Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 87; Hilda Lloréns, *Imagining the Great Puerto Rican Family: Framing Nation, Race, and Gender during the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 32, 39, 79.

(26.) Ileana M. Rodríguez-Silva, *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3, 5, 8, 224; Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 236-39, 244, 252-54; Eileen J. Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). For a discussion of shifting color codes and consciousness in Chicana history, see Vicki L. Ruiz, "Morena/o, Blanca/o, y Café con Leche: Racial Constructions in Chicana/o Historiography," in *The Practice of U.S. Women's History: Narratives, Intersections, and Dialogues*, ed. S. Jay

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Kleinberg, Eileen Boris, and Vicki L. Ruiz (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 221–37.

(27.) Kessler-Harris, “Do We Still Need Women’s History?”

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