A Brief Historiography of the Interpretation of Gender in Women's History

Katherine Merzbacher O'Bryan, PhD Spring, 2013

Over the last three decades, the interpretation of gender in women's history has undergone a rapid transformation. This essay will analyze the development of gender as a social and cultural construct in North American women's history, arguing that women's historians of the mid-to-late 1980s advanced the interpretation of gender from the then-prevalent framework of the "separate spheres" metaphor to an analysis of gender as a social and cultural construct. Women's history scholars of the early-1990s, influenced by scholarship in the social sciences, asserted that cross-cultural and historical interpretations of gender frontiers and cultural encounters could expose contests of power in history. Women's historians of the late-1990s and early-2000s continued to broaden this interpretive lens to focus, to an even larger degree, on cultural representations as central in lives of women of different genders, class, and races. This transformation has culminated in the recognition of gender as its own analytic framework for the interpretation of women's history in the 2000s.

In "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s," Nancy A. Hewitt argues that the formative works in American women's history have focused on the formation of separate sexual spheres for women and men.[1] Hewitt asserts that feminists of the 1970s claimed that gender was the primary source of oppression in society, and that women were initially viewed as victims of oppression at the hands of powerful males in medicine, the church, education, the state, and the family.[2] Women's historians writing in the late-1960s and 1970s soon began to view this oppression as a double-edged sword, claiming that the exclusion from areas of male dominance could

[1] Nancy A. Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s," *Social History* 10, no. 3, North American Issue (October 1985): 299-321.

[2] Ibid., 299.

mean an inclusion in an all-female enclave. Hewitt claims that these women's historians, including Barbara Welter, Nancy F. Cott, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, asserted that there was a rich female subculture that was the foundation for a community of middle-class women in antebellum and Victorian America. Through the work of these early feminist historians, the true woman/separate spheres/woman's culture triad became the predominant framework for interpreting the lives of North American women.[3] Hewitt asserts that women's historians broadened this interpretive framework to include women of different classes and races by claiming patriarchy as the common force that women held in common and modernization as the force that spread the idea of true womanhood and separate spheres throughout society.[4]

In *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914*, Karen J. Blair presents an analysis of women's membership in literary clubs as a form of feminism for late-nineteenth century middle-class women. Central to Blair's argument is the premise that there was a strict division between the private female sphere of domesticity, morality, and sensitivity and the public male political sphere. Blair asserts that there were groups of middle-class women in the late-nineteenth century who united in the bonds of sisterhood to form literary organizations like Sorosis and the New England Woman's Club not to resist the traditional imagery of the late-nineteenth century lady, but rather, to contend that it was these very domestic qualities that society attributed to them that made these women the most likely candidates to initiate social and moral

[3] Ibid., 300-301.

[4] Ibid., 303-304.

reforms in the public sphere.[5] While Blair does argue that it was society that attributed these qualities to the women, and, though her assertion of Domestic Feminism claims that women were making a place for themselves in public, she holds strong to the dichotomy of private/female and public/male spheres.

Like Blair, in *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*, Dolores Hayden contends that groups of late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century women banded together in an attempt to better their position socially and within their homes. Hayden argues that material feminists fought to achieve economic independence for women by raising awareness of the value of domestic work that was considered part of the woman's sphere. These women felt that, through cooperative housekeeping and, later, social or municipal housekeeping and the development of revolutionary new building types for individual homes, neighborhoods, and cities, they could foster female economic independence.[6] While Hayden praises modern feminists of the late-1970s for moving beyond the material feminists to question separate social spheres for men and women, Hayden's work analyzes the social, spatial, and economic lives of men and women through the metaphor of separate spheres. Furthermore, she closes the book by stating that "today's feminists should accept women's sphere as an essential, historical, material base."[7]

According to Hewitt, however, as more women's historians began examining the lives of the Black and White working-class, they became increasingly unsatisfied with

---

[5]Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980).

[6] Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

[7] Ibid., 303.

the ability of the separate spheres metaphor to explain the differences that were apparent in the lives of Victorian middle-and working-class women.[8] Historians writing in the mid-to-late1980s began to contest the interpretation of the prior two decades that separate spheres was a reality in the lives of historical women and an appropriate metaphor for historical analysis. Historians began to assert that the metaphor of separate spheres was an oversimplification that created a homogenous womanhood that failed to account for the differences that were the reality of the lives of individual women. Additionally, they alleged that the interpretive metaphor of separate spheres did not acknowledge the importance of class and race in differentiating the experiences of individual women.[9]

Hewitt argues that analyzing women in history in terms of a "separate spheres" metaphor is problematic because this idea was itself a cultural construct. She explains that there was a culturally dominant definition of sexual spheres that was promulgated by an economically, politically, and socially dominant group and that this definition was based on the sexual division of labor appropriate to that dominant class, but that there were other definitions that developed based on the sexual divisions of labor in other class and/or racial groups.[10] In "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Joan W. Scott, like Hewitt, contends that gender was a cultural construction, a "social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men."[11] Scott explains that it is necessary to analyze the interrelationship between the individual and the larger social organization in

---

[8] Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood," 300.

[9] Ibid., 300-302.

[10] Ibid., 215.

[11] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no.5 (Dec. 1986): 1056. 1053-1075.

order to better understand how gender has worked historically.[12] Linda K. Kerber agrees with Scott in "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," arguing that while the metaphor of separate spheres enabled historians to move the history of women from the trivial and anecdotal realm of history into the arena of analytic social history, to continue to use this framework would ignore the interrelationship between gender and society. Kerber argues that historians writing in the mid-to-late1980s attempted to demonstrate that the "separate" sphere of women was both affected by what men did and, in turn, influenced the activities of men.[13]

In the mid-to-late 1980s several women's historians writing about turn-of-the-century middle- and working-class women and the burgeoning culture of consumption acknowledged the social construction of gender in their analyses. Writing in 1986, Kathy Peiss asserts that the analysis of gender relations is the chief concern of her study, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York.* Peiss discusses the working-class construction of gender and argues that it was influenced by the changing form and meaning of leisure, especially in the lives of young, unmarried, wage-earning women. She states that, as single wage-earning women had more leisure time, forms of leisure, such as dancing and organized excursions, became increasingly commercialized. While this provided a social space in which these women could engage in mixed-sex activities, Peiss argues that their role in the labor force, their family, and

---

[12] Ibid, 1053-1075.

[13] Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 37-38.

"treating" by men continued make them dependent, and that this dependency of women would come to define the cultural construction of gender in the twentieth century.[14]

Like Peiss, Elaine S. Abelson argues that new forms of consumption in the early-twentieth century led to negative social constructions of some females. In *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*, Abelson asserts that the predominant image of the middle-class shoplifter was that of a victim. Because it was unfathomable to think that respectable middle-class women could shoplift, these women were treated as ill, and diagnosed with kleptomania. Kleptomania became a social construct, a sign of the weakness and inferiority of middle-class women. Abelson also highlights the difference in social construction of classes of women when she notes that middle-class women who shoplifted were kleptomaniacs, but working-class women who shoplifted were thieves.[15]

In *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*, Joanne J. Meyerowitz analyzes the changing public discourse surrounding these single females living in Chicago. She explains that several groups constructed the dominant public image of the woman adrift, including the middle-class women reformers of the boarding home movement, the largely female authors of popular romance novels, and the entrepreneurs who developed mass culture industries. In the late-nineteenth century, the women of the boarding home movement depicted the woman adrift as an endangered orphan in need of protection. These women invested the woman adrift with stereotypes

---

[14] Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

[15] Elaine S Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), chapters 6 and 7.

of feminine weakness and innocence in an effort to excuse the sexual behavior of the woman adrift. Around the same time, the writers of romance novels also depicted the woman adrift as a hapless individual who was incapable of caring for herself, although these heroines typically triumphed at the end of the tale. Meyerowitz argues that by the 1920s, this discourse had shifted, and the woman adrift was viewed as a trailblazer, an image the creators of mass culture industries cultivated. Meyerowitz claims that many reformers now gave more agency to the woman adrift as the women forced the reformers to view them as competent adults.[16]

The work of Peiss, Abelson, and Meyerowitz also exemplifies the development of another trend in women's history that gained a foothold in the profession in the mid-1980s, as women's historians were beginning to assert that the social and cultural construction of gender contributed to the formation of relationships of power. Joan W. Scott began to discuss the implications of gender constructions and power as early as 1986, and by the early-1990s, other women's historians were agreeing with her analysis. In "'Opinionative Assurance:' The Challenge of Women's History," Linda K. Kerber argues that the primary challenge for women's history in the early-1990s was to strive to understand and interpret "economic and social relationships not as 'natural' but as socially constructed arrangements that benefit one group at the expense of another."[17]

In *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*, Deborah Fink argues that Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideology of nuclear families working

---

[16] Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), chapter 3.

[17] Linda K. Kerber, "'Opinionative Assurance:' The Challenge of Women's History," *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no. 1, History Education Reform (Summer 1991): 32.

independently-owned farms created different ideals for men and women, and made women's inequality and subordination to men integral to his vision of an ideal society. While Fink contends that women were not necessarily passive victims, she asserts that the structure of farm households and farm labor served to isolate and weaken the social and economic position of rural women. In addition to their farm chores, which varied by class, but could have included livestock tending, poultry work, and field labor, women were also charged with providing food, housekeeping, and were constantly involved in cycles of childbirth and child rearing, while the seasonal farm work of men enabled them to have time for social and civic interests. Fink also claims that the federal government, through rural reform efforts, essentially legally sanctioned and supported the role of the rural women as a wife and mother who was supported by a husband. The United States Department of Agriculture's extension service provided programs in agricultural education for men and boys and home economics for women and girls. The Farm Security Administration prioritized loans to families in which the woman performed a traditional role as wife and mother and demonstrated a loyalty to farming. The Works Progress Administration only provided relief to a woman if she were a widow or separated from her husband.[18]

By the early-1990s many women's historians were analyzing how a multiplicity of social constructions, especially gender and race, created dichotomous relationships of those with power and those who were oppressed. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls on women's historians to consider race as a factor in their analyses of power in "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." She asserts that, like

---

[18] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

gender, race was also a social construction. Like Nancy A. Hewitt, who argued that class predominated over gender and prevented a unification of all women, Higginbotham claims that, in the lives of Black women, race was the predominant social construction. She explains that, while historians of Black women have asserted the dominance of race in the lives of Black women, they have failed to differentiate the gender and class positions of Black men and women within the Black community, thereby further accentuating race and creating a "monolithic black community."[19]

While women's historians were developing new analyses of power and production in the early-1990s, they were also beginning to incorporate ideas from the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, and perhaps most notably, anthropology, into their analyses. The influence of this "new cultural history" on the field of women's history helped to produce scholarly works that incorporated cross-cultural analyses. In "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," Kathleen M. Brown advocates for interpreting the cultural differences in gender divisions as "gender frontiers," and as locations where contests of power can occur. She contends that examining gender cross-culturally and historically within a comparative framework will allow women's historians to avoid essentialism and begin to better appreciate the critical role that gender played in colonial encounters and conflicts of power.[20]

By the late-1990s and early-2000s, women's historians were enlarging the interpretive lens and focusing on cultural representations of women to an even greater

---

[19] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274.

[20] Kathleen M. Brown, "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, 50, no. 2, Early American History: Its Past and Future (Apr. 1993): 311-328.

degree. In "Productive Collaborations: The Benefits of Cultural Analysis to the Past, Present, and Future of Women's History," Kathi Kern contends that the analysis of cultural representations of gender and race are a positive development in the field of women's history. She states that it is critical for historians to understand the ways that women were historically constructed because these constructions shaped the reality of their lives.[21] She asserts that "the study of cultural discourses has deepened our understanding of women's structural realities."[22]

Rebecca Sharpless presents an integrated analysis of constructed gender differences amongst women of different ethnicities in *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940*. Sharpless concurs with Fink, arguing that women were often isolated on single-family farms and typically found themselves subordinate to the men in their lives, whether it be a father, husband, or, later in life as a widow, son. She also contends that this ideology of subordination was transmitted to female children in their socialization process.[23] Additionally, Sharpless embraces a cross-cultural analysis in her discussion of the traditions of Anglo, Czech, African American, German, and Mexican families that lived in the Blackland Prairie region of Texas. She discusses the traditions and lifeways of each of these diverse ethnic groups, but she also interprets some of the "gender frontiers" that occurred in the lives of these women.[24] This is exemplified in her discussion of Anglo families hiring Mexican or

---

[21] Kathi Kern, "Productive Collaborations: The Benefits of Cultural Analysis to the Past, Present, and Future of Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 34-40.

[22] Ibid., 38.

[23] Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 35.

[24] Ibid., discussed throughout book.

African American women to do their laundry. Sharpless notes that this work was segregated by race, and asserts the implications for these Mexican and African American women, who, in addition to their own household chores, took on the additional work of local White women.[25]

Perhaps the greatest development in the interpretation and analysis of gender in women's history occurred in the 2000s, as several prominent women's historians began to recognize the importance of gender as its own paradigm for historical analysis. In "Recent Directions in Gender and Women's History," Nancy F. Cott and Drew Gilpin Faust recognize a new direction in scholarship, one in which gender becomes a framework or analytic category for the historical study of women.[26] Similarly, writing a year later in "The New Political History and Women's History: Comments on the Democratic Experiment," Kathryn Kish Sklar advocates for a paradigm that centers around women or gender and that locates women or gender in the larger historical discourse of American political history.[27]

Jane E. Simonson's approach to gender analysis in *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919* perhaps best exemplifies this most recent development in the interpretation of gender in women's history. Simonsen's work represents the evolution of gender analysis over the last three decades. She asserts that domesticity, which was the product of different kinds of women's work, was an imperial construct used by the White middle-class to maintain and

---

[25] Ibid., 104.

[26] Nancy F. Cott and Drew Gilpin Faust, "Recent Directions in Gender and Women's History," *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no.2 (March 2005): 4-5.

[27] Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The New Political History and Women's History: Comments on the Democratic Experiment," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 4 (Aug. 2006): 509-514.

espouse its power in the rapidly expanding and diversifying nation. In her study, Simonsen analyzes multiple cultures – Native American and White – and classes – middle-class and working-class – of women and discusses contests of power that occurred as these frontiers met.[28] Simonsen structures her work through the framework of gender analysis. This is perhaps best exemplified in her discussion of model homes as object lessons in Native American assimilation. She asserts that White middle-class women used the construct of domesticity and women's work in model homes in an attempt to inculcate more "civilized" lifeways in Native American women and their families. Simonsen contends that, while these female White middle-class professionals thought that the common bond of women's work would gain the trust of the Native American women, in actuality the difference in power and authority often caused the Native American women to resist "civilized" domesticity.[29]

The last three decades have witnessed the transformation of the interpretation of gender in the field of women's history. This interpretation has shifted from the 1970s discussion of women ensconced in a "separate sphere" to the breakdown of that metaphor as a framework for the analysis of women's history in the mid-to-late 1980s. The women's historians of this era, including Nancy A. Hewitt, Joan W. Scott, and Linda K. Kerber, asserted that an understanding of the interdependence of both women and society, as well as women and men, was crucial when interpreting the lives of women in history. With the incorporation of anthropology and other social science disciplines into the analysis of women's history in the early-1990s, scholars, including Kerber and

---

[28] Jane E. Simonsen, *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[29] Ibid., chapter 3.

Kathleen M. Brown, asserted that cross-cultural and historical interpretations of gender frontiers and cultural encounters could expose contests of power in history. By the late-1990s and early-2000s women's historians were broadening the interpretive lens to focus, to an even larger degree, on cultural representations as central in lives of women of different genders, classes, and races. By the middle of the 2000s, several notable women's historians, including Drew Gilpin Faust, Nancy F. Cott, and Kathryn Kish Sklar were advocating gender as an analytic framework for the interpretation of women's history.

Bibliography

Abelson, Elaine S. *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Alexander, Leslie M. "The Challenge of Race: Rethinking the Position of Black Women in the Field of Women's History." *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 50-60.

Benson, Susan Porter. *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Berry, Daina Ramey. *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Blair, Karen J. *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980.

———. *The Torchbearers: Women and Their Amateur Arts Associations in America, 1890-1930*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Brown, Kathleen M. "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History." *The William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, 50, no. 2, Early American History: Its Past and Future (Apr. 1993): 311-328.

Cobble, Dorothy Sue. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Cott, Nancy F., and Drew Gilpin Faust. "Recent Directions in Gender and Women's History." *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no.2 (March 2005): 4-5.

Cott, Nancy F. *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

D'Antonio, Patricia. *American Nursing: A History of Knowledge, Authority, and the Meaning of Work*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

Deutsch, Sarah. *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Enstam, Elizabeth York. *Women and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998.

Fink, Deborah. *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Hayden, Dolores. *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.

Hewitt, Nancy A. "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s." *Social History* 10, no. 3, North American Issue (October 1985): 299-321.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274.

Hoffschwelle, Mary S. *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998.

Katzman, David M. *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Kerber, Linda K. "'Opinionative Assurance:' The Challenge of Women's History." *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no. 1, History Education Reform (Summer 1991): 30-34.

———. "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39.

Kern, Kathi. "Productive Collaborations: The Benefits of Cultural Analysis to the Past, Present, and Future of Women's History." *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 34-40.

Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Out to Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Majority Finds Its Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

———. "U.S. Women's History Past, Present, and Future." *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 10-27.

Meyerowitz, Joanne J. *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

Ryan, Mary P. "The Public and the Private Good: Across the Great Divide in Women's History." *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 10-27.

Scott, Joan W. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no.5 (Dec. 1986): 1053-1075.

Sharpless, Rebecca. *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Simonsen, Jane E. *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Sklar, Kathryn Kish. "The New Political History and Women's History: Comments on the Democratic Experiment." *The History Teacher* 39, no. 4 (Aug. 2006): 509-514.

Smith, Bonnie G. "Women's History: A Retrospective from the United States." *Signs* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 723-747.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America.

Walker, Melissa, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, Part 1 (Summer 1966): 151-174.

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry. "World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality." *Journal of World History* 18, no. 1 (Mar. 2007): 53-67.