
The Ethnography of Gender: Reconsidering Gender as an Object of Study

ABSTRACT In her 1998 article “The Lady Vanishes,” Elizabeth Clark issued a challenge to the foundationalisms of feminist historiography of Late Antiquity through developments in poststructuralist theory. This article proposes its own reorientation to historical work on gender, but it does so now in light of recent developments in Black feminist, transgender, and postcolonial feminist studies, arguing gender should be understood as always within colonialism and racialization. It describes the way gender appears in the linked projects of the medicalized body and ethnographic discourses, both in antiquity and modernity, and asks about the political stakes and ambivalent histories attending gender as an analytically separable facet of experience. It also offers a brief reframing of the *Proto-gospel of James* and select scholarship on late ancient Christianity to offer a constructive redirection for the field of Late Antiquity. **KEYWORDS** postcolonial theory, queer studies, gender, racialization, Christianity

What makes gender as an object of study possible? In particular, how is it that gender, as a facet of subjectivity and experience, can become a critical consideration? Or, more to the point, what makes it possible to speak only of gender? To analytically separate it from other facets of subjectivity and experience?

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Almost 25 years ago, in “The Lady Vanishes,” Elizabeth Clark offered a reorientation for feminist historiography in light of poststructuralist theories that unsettled feminist foundationalisms, such as finding women in history, “women’s experience,” and the very category of “woman” itself.¹ She did so from her position as a feminist scholar, herself invested in some of the same structures of thought she had come to challenge. In a similar vein, and taking up a similar self-scrutinizing posture, I offer here a new reorientation to the project of ancient historical work on gender: this time, in light of (primarily) postcolonial and Black feminist scholarship on histories of the production of gender. I will do so by charting the ways gender is configured and produced within frames of peoplehood, racialization, and histories of colonialism, both in the ancient world and in the modern one.

That is to say that gender, race, and colonialism are more than simply constituted enterprises. Gender, as we have received it, is effectively a subcategory of colonialism and racialization. This means its emergence as an isolated analytic is troublingly linked to the ongoing conditions of racialization and colonization. In other words, there is no gendered body outside or apart from the production—and reproduction—of racialized populations. So what I offer is not only a history of the erasures that gender as such abets, but a demonstration of how the colonial and racialized machinery producing gender might be more centralized in our understandings of late ancient literature and history. In fact, I argue that gender ought to be reconsidered as primarily a doorway into the myriad lived conditions and momentums of colonization and racialization.

I’ll chart how gender appears within colonialism and racializing schemas generally, but specifically through the medicalized body and ethnographic discourses and practices,² both in antiquity and in modernity. In other words,

1. Elizabeth Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 1–31.

2. *Ethnography* and *ethnographic knowledge* in this article simply mean the conceptualization of populations through select description of their social, cultural, or physical features. Such description is often framed as neutral, objective, or scientific. This is in contrast to *ethnography* as a specific literary tradition and canon of (largely) Greek literature. My goal here is to crystallize ethnographic culture more clearly as a wider ancient Mediterranean impulse, one that is not at all uniquely or originally Greek. A broader understanding of ethnography is also suggested in Emma Dench, “Ethnography and History,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, ed. John Marincola (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 493–503; Joseph E. Skinner, *The Invention of Greek Ethnography: From Homer to Herodotus* (New York: Oxford, 2013). Todd Berzon’s *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) suggests an “ethnographic disposition” (title of chapter 1), and Antti

I'll account for the racialized production of a gendered body in Mediterranean antiquity, a form of power and social organization that both echoes back and amplifies in colonial modernity. Then, through a brief rereading of a key passage in the *Proto-gospel of James*, I'll suggest how scholarship on Christianity in Late Antiquity can adjust for this changed perspective. The implications for this changed perspective obviously far exceed Christian literature or culture in this period. But because of the dominance of Christianity in Late Antiquity and colonial modernity, and because of Christianity's long reputation for attempting to universalize belonging outside of signifiers of ethnicity or race (more on that to follow), it is especially crucial to make the workings and deletions of colonization and racialization more evident there.

My larger argument is that gender as an object of analysis, most consciously indebted to French feminist philosophy and third-wave feminist theory, has produced countless necessary recognitions. It has been both prolific and interesting in what it yielded for our understandings of the shape and articulation of certain forms of power in the ancient world. However, the place of gender in the production of "ideal citizens" and ethnic or racialized subjects in both Mediterranean antiquity and in modernity means that those of us who have used gender as a primary or unqualified category of analysis must reconsider the politics and endgame of that work.³ The goal here is not to "take gender away" as an object of study. It is rather a plea to ask: What do we want from gender now?

The notion that gender is racially and colonially constituted is, I want to reiterate, not a new insight. But it is an insight that has not been taken up wholesale, or even much at all, in historical studies of gender in the ancient world, for reasons that I'll speculate about at more length. *Gender* unqualified remains an unshakeable staple. But the last decade or more of work in Black, Indigenous, postcolonial, and transgender studies should provoke the field

Lampinen speaks of an "ethnographicising register and techniques" in "Physiognomy, Ekphrasis, and the 'Ethnographicising' Register in the Second Sophistic," in *Visualizing the Invisible with the Human Body: Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World*, ed. J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 227–70, at 227. Three relatively recent studies on ethnographic literature, specifically, are Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

3. My own previous work reading and analyzing for gender should be included in the critique here.

into a reckoning with the conservativisms of gender as an exclusive object of analysis, and to veer the field away from the institutionalization and circumscription of projects like it. This will also hopefully provoke a reckoning with the ambivalences of professionalized ancient history as a site of (safe) politics.

ETHNOGRAPHY, GENDER, AND THE PATHOLOGIZED BODY

“Moreover, most Scythians become impotent [*eunouxiai*], do women’s work, live like women, and talk in the same way. They call these men Anarieis. The locals themselves attribute it to god and look at these men with awe and devotion, because they fear for themselves. I myself hold that this disease [*pathos*] and all others are from god and none is more divine or more human than any other. Each disease has a natural cause, and nothing happens without a natural cause.”

—Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places*, translation mine

In Hippocrates’s *Airs, Waters, Places* (fifth century BCE), one of the very earliest known texts of the Greek medical tradition, we find a notion of the body—its features and symptoms—as a natural phenomenon. That is, we find a notion of the body that is bound up in natural forces and landscapes (the climate and weather, geography), its symptoms a matter of elements in and out of balance, and thus a body that is not simply at the mercy of the gods. But of course we also find other things: the naturalization of conventional understandings of gender,⁴ and bodies imagined in ethnic or racializing terms.⁵ That is, we see how medical literature’s normative judgments on

4. These were not identical to modern biological dichotomies of gendered difference: it was less the organs that marked certain medical subjects as women and more the substance scale of hot/cold, dry/wet that did so (bound up in the theory of four humors). See Helen King, *Hippocrates Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

5. Although obviously race as such has a particular history in colonial modernity (naturalized through phenotype and skin color, for instance), I refer in this article more often to *racialization* in order to denaturalize race-as-essence in favor of an emphasis on the process of production of marked populations. *Race* and *ethnicity*, which in modernity tend to signify biology and culture, respectively, both work as imperfect translations for ancient conceptual worlds in which geography, physiology, culture, language, and kinship were interlinked in various ways and to various extents to serve different rhetorical ends. I use both race and ethnicity somewhat interchangeably to avoid such a biology/culture distinction, while simultaneously contributing to a “long history” of race, in the spirit of Geraldine Heng’s important book *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford, 2018) and compatible work on race and antiquity done by Rebecca Kennedy, Terrence Keel, Benjamin Isaac, and others. As Heng shows, even while concepts of race are clearly specific to time and place, we can speak cross-temporally about race-making as a practice in which “strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressure, so as to

bodies, its pathologies, are conditioned not just by gendered hierarchies but simultaneously by cultural and ethnic hierarchies. Understanding the elemental and environmental forces that shaped and imbued the composition and disposition of bodies meant not just the production of medical knowledge but also the production of ethnographic knowledge.

Neither medical knowledge production nor ethnographic knowledge production were the sole or original property of the Greeks. Scholarship on Mesopotamian and Egyptian medical literature has shown how practices and interests that seem to be particular to Greek medicine—incubation and humoral theory, for instance—had predecessors and parallels across the ancient near east.⁶ And recently Philip A. Harland has argued from an array of sources that ethnographic practices and discourses were long part of everyday social life across the ancient Mediterranean and Near East including, importantly, between nondominant peoples, and not necessarily as a direct response to Greek culture or domination.⁷ But an innovation of Greek medical and ethnographic interests seems to be the way they are merged, a move in which racialization becomes pathologization.⁸ Indeed the rough contemporaneity of *Airs, Waters, Places*, on the one hand, and the earliest surviving model of ethnography in Herodotus's *Histories* (440–420 BCE) on the other, suggests that in Greek cultural history, the medical body and

construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment,” and we can speak of race as “structural relationships for the articulation and management of human differences” (3). I agree with Heng that categories of otherness and difference are not sufficient for naming the force of social relations and tracing important consonances between antiquity and racializing practices in modernity.

6. For example, the Ebbes papyrus, the Kahun papyrus, and the Edwin Smith papyrus all attest to the antiquity and longevity of Egyptian medical practices. See also Annie Attia and Gilles Buisson, eds., *Advances in Mesopotamian Medicine from Hammurabi to Hippocrates: Proceedings of the International Conference “Oeil malade et mauvais oeil,” Collège de France, Paris, 23rd June 2006* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Joan Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014); Christian Leitz, *The Magical and Medical Papyri of the New Kingdom* (London: British Museum Press, 2000). See also the older and classic J. B. de C. M. Saunders, *The Transition from Ancient Egyptian to Greek Medicine* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1963).

7. Philip Harland, “Climbing the Ethnic Ladder: Ethnic Hierarchies and Judean Responses,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138 (2019): 665–86; Harland, “Syrians Call You Astarte . . . Lycian Peoples Call You Leto’: Ethnic Relations and Circulating Legends in the Villages of Egypt,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 80 (2021): 357–76; Harland, “From That Time, Nothing Else Has Been Discovered’: Subject Peoples and Civilizational Priority,” *Harvard Theological Review* (forthcoming, 2023).

8. For an account of racialized/racializing deformity in antiquity, see Robert Garland, “The Invention and Application of Ethnic Deformity,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in Classical and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis (New York: Routledge, 2015), 45–61.

the ethnographic body are products of the same imagination and need to be treated as such.

We further see this overlap of pathologizing and racializing interests in physiognomy, the geographically widespread ancient practice of scrutinizing the body's visual signs to reveal the truth of more abstract realities. While physiognomy in Mesopotamia, for instance, was primarily deployed for the discerning of illnesses and bodily conditions, in Greek and Roman cultural history—including, importantly, rhetoric—physiognomy was largely an art or science of the deduction of character traits.⁹ “Character traits,” however, were often overtly ethnically/racially inflected, operating on logics of environmental determinism,¹⁰ and producing a “diagnosis” through a graphic scrutiny of bodies.

Of course, medicalized, ethnographic knowledge was also heavily invested in gendered tropes. *Airs, Waters, Places* and Herodotus's *Histories*, for instance, not only share an interest in natural causality but also use gender (especially androgyny and masculinity) to paint Scythians in all of their cultural specificity.¹¹ Scythians tend to collect the most vivid descriptions of their queerness, but never with much coherence across sources: how masculinity, effeminacy, or androgyny are said to figure in Scythian society is a constantly moving target.¹² Herodotus's characterizations of all kinds of people (Lydians, Egyptians, Thracians, Amazons) are drawn up with recourse to norms and aberrations of gender and sexuality.¹³ Indeed a stock feature of ethnographic writing in this period and beyond is an interest in both gender and sexuality at the level of population.

9. J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru, “Introduction,” in *Visualizing the Invisible*, 1–10. *Racializing* is my language.

10. See again Lampinen, “Physiognomy, Ekphrasis, and the Ethnographicising Register.” On environmental determinism's place and function in physiognomy, see also Max Goldman, “Ethnic Bodies: Physiognomy, Identity and the Environment,” in Futo Kennedy and Jones-Lewis, *Routledge Handbook*, 62–74.

11. *Scythians* is already an outsider term that homogenizes various northern peoples. Charles Chiasson, “Scythian Androgyny and Environmental Determinism in Herodotus and the Hippocratic *περί ἀέρων ὑδάτων τόπων*,” *Syllecta classica* 12 (2001): 33–73.

12. See, for instance, the description of Scythians in Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 2.44.44–45.

13. See Edith Hall, “Asia Unmanned: Images of Victory in Classical Athens,” in *War and Society in the Greek World*, ed. J. Rich and G. Shipley (London: Routledge, 1993), 108–33; M. Richard Wenghofer, “Sexual Promiscuity of Non-Greeks in Herodotus' *Histories*,” *Classical World* 107 (2014): 515–34.

It is this question of population that presses us to avoid an analysis that simply homes in on how gender appears *alongside* the racializing schema of ethnographic description, or to avoid merely observing how the medicalized body has both ethnic and gendered features and designs within it. I want to more meticulously read for the ways the project of gender is a conduit toward colonial projects of racialization and communal membership, or citizenship, and the way gender's clear instabilities, however exciting for their apparent subversiveness, are functionally exploited for the stabilization of populations.

We might recall the influential study of David Halperin who, among others, showed how gender was part of the making of the citizen body in classical Greece, illustrating how this gendered citizen was configured with and through penetrability or inviolability.¹⁴ We might also recall how, in the Roman period, ideals of masculinity figured as an essential part of Roman self-understanding,¹⁵ and how propaganda depicted Rome's conquered nations in emphatically sexualized, gendered, and ethnically stereotyped ways, as in the infamous portraits at the civic temple of the Augusti at Aphrodisias.¹⁶ What's more, while ethnicity is not an explicit preoccupation in gynecological literature of the second century (Soranus, for example), we do see a preoccupation with the production of a particular kind of child, the management of the environment of the womb, and the selection of the proper wet nurse. This too aligns with the general interests of citizenship, colonial empire-making, and normativity across populations.¹⁷ Rabbinic

14. David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 88–112. See also Nicole Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias: The Feminine and the Greek Man*, trans. Paula Wissing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Victoria Wohl, *Love among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

15. For instance, Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Representation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jennifer Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), esp. chapter 1.

16. The depiction of Rome's conquered nations has been of special interest to New Testament scholars; see for instance Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Lynn Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2015).

17. This is not always true of gynecological literature and seems specific to the Greek texts. The oldest known medical papyrus, the Egyptian Kahun papyrus, which is a gynecological and obstetric text, shows no such interests. On colonial dynamics of reproduction and the intimacies of family life and child-rearing, see for instance Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Interestingly, Laurence Totelin argues that, for Soranus and Galen, gender was not necessarily a primary difference. Soranus was unsure whether there were diseases that belonged only to women, and Galen described women's physiology through the grid of men's physiology (commonly described as the "one sex"

literature of this period reveals just how significant the burden was on the womb and its contents to bear out peoplehood and belonging.¹⁸ The eroticized, even pornographic, dimensions of the ethnographic and medicalized gaze mean, too, that gender is implied in the relations between the ethnographer or physician and his subjects.¹⁹ Borrowing here from so much feminist critique of the visual field: the ethnographic and medical gaze is, in short, penetrative.

Given the ethnographic and medical interest in population-making, and gender's clear place in that work, we have to ask: How and why has gender, as an object of historical study, been so divorced, or only tentatively or belatedly linked, to processes associated with race and population? The answer has everything to do with the modern production of gender itself within (and as analytically separable from) racial and colonial regimes, as I'll note ahead. In many cases it also has to do with the erasure of ethnicity and racialization through the retrojected and modern colonial category of religion, a category that was carved out in the interest of universalizing European Christianity.²⁰

So, it makes sense that the categories of Christian and Christianity, with an implied or explicit relationship to reified religion, tend to make it difficult to see ancient ethnographic culture in its fullness, especially when the references to ethnicity and racialization are sometimes less upfront than in Hippocrates or physiognomic texts. There has already been work documenting, in different ways and to different extents, ethnographic culture in the late ancient Mediterranean, with special attention given to Christianity. Scholars such as Jeremy Schott, Denise Buell, Aaron Johnson, and Todd Berzon have importantly illustrated how late ancient Christian intellectual cultures and identities were baked in ethnic discourses.²¹ For Buell and Berzon, however,

model); Totelin, "The Third Way: Galen, Pseudo-Galen, Metrodora, Cleopatra, and the Gynaecological Pharmacology of Byzantium," in *Collecting Recipes: Byzantine and Jewish Pharmacology in Dialogue*, ed. Lennart Lehmhaus and Matteo Martelli (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 103–22.

18. Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

19. Pete Sigal, Zeb Tortorici, and Neil L. Whitehead, eds., *Ethnopornography: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Archival Knowledge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

20. See especially Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

21. Denise Buell, *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Aaron Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Preparatio*

ethnicity still seems to operate mostly at the level of metaphor for Christian self-understanding, which suggests that Christians are just “borrowing” ethnic logics (Buell) or ethnographic practices (Berzon) that Christians themselves are somehow external to. In this scenario, Christians are implied to be something other than ethnic. Schott, on the other hand, offers an account of how this externality might have been produced, which suggests, like Peter Brown’s brief provocation in *The Making of Late Antiquity*, that Christian belonging was an avenue of escape or relief from the complications of local and familial belongings, even if the escape was more desired than accomplished and thus an intractable enmeshment.²²

But if we don’t assume the externality of Christian belonging to ethnicity (that is, if we don’t position Christian belonging as whiteness has been typically positioned—as unmarked), we could leverage and reframe some pivotal work in scholarship on Late Antiquity to demonstrate the medicalized, ethnographic body’s prominence. Perhaps most distinctly, Andrew Jacobs’s *Christ Circumcised* lays out a history of the investments in Christ’s circumcision in the negotiation of Christian and Jewish identity and difference, and importantly places circumcision within a larger Roman cultural economy of bodily signs.²³ We might also consider Virginia Burrus’s “Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome.” Much like David Halperin’s work on citizenship in Athens, Burrus demonstrates how bodies marked as female—porous, penetrable—were employed to carve out the limits of idealized orthodox Christian belonging.²⁴

Evangelica (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jeremy Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Berzon, *Classifying Christians*.

22. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978): “This was the disturbing feature of third-century Christianity. It offered a community which, in symbolic form, clearly accepted the breakdown of the equipoise on which the traditional pagan community rested. Its initiation was conceived of as producing men shorn of the complexities of their earthly identities . . . Christian baptism was a ceremony of simplification” (74). Furthermore, Brown writes, “it was not so much a ceremony of rejection and renunciation as of cutting down anomalous and conflicting strands in the life and personality of the baptized” (74). On the constitutive anxieties of Christian identity, see also Jeremy Schott, “Philosophies of Language, Theories of Translation, and Imperial Intellectual Production: The Cases of Porphyry, Iamblicus, and Eusebius,” *Church History* 78, no. 4 (2009): 855–61.

23. Andrew Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

24. Virginia Burrus, “Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome,” *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (1991): 229–48. See also Burrus, “Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance,” *Arethusa* 38 (2005): 49–88.

Compatibly, Jennifer Knust's *Abandoned to Lust* and Susanna Drake's *Slandering the Jew* show how thoroughly sexualized and gendered invective saturated social and cultural boundary negotiation.²⁵ We might also recast David Frankfurter's work on martyrological texts and the prurient gaze as describing a barely sublimated ethnopornography, especially since the controversial sado-erotic pleasure evoked by martyr stories (noted by so many ancient writers) is made possible by certain social condensations in the stories.²⁶ And we already know that physiognomy appears in Christian texts and imaginations, as when late ancient hagiographic texts drew from physiognomy to read the faces of saints. But the racializing dimensions of physiognomy have not yet been truly integrated into this work.²⁷

In all these studies, we can feel the ethnographic and medicalized body, with all its fascinating, worrisome symptoms and invitations for inspection, haunting the scene. But how might we begin to reorient ourselves to this medicalized, ethnographic body that is the subtext of so much of Christian Late Antiquity? I want to start with a highly charged passage from a second- or third-century text elaborating on stories of Jesus's birth, the *Proto-gospel of James*, to illustrate what happens when gender is understood as a window into and function of racialized or ethnicized population production.²⁸ The

25. Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*; Susanna Drake, *Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

26. David Frankfurter, "Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009): 215–45.

27. Polemon's *Physiognomy*, from the second century CE, had a long and prolific life in Late Antiquity and beyond; see Simon Swain, ed., *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam* (New York: Oxford 2007). For direct discussion of physiognomy and early Christianity, see Callie Callon, *Reading Bodies: Physiognomy as a Strategy of Persuasion in Early Christian Discourse* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). For a description of physiognomy and its affective force in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, see Jaimie Gunderson, "The Odor of Paul's Opponents: Disgust, Deviancy, and the Struggle for Authority in the Corinthian Assembly," *Biblical Interpretation* 30 (2022): 578–99, in part building on J. Albert Harrill, "Invective against Paul (2 Cor 10:10), the Physiognomics of the Ancient Slave Body, and the Greco-Roman Rhetoric of Masculinity," in *Antiquity and Humanity: Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins and Margaret Y. Mitchell (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 189–214; Georgia Frank, *Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 134–70.

28. Most contemporary scholarship assumes a second- or third-century dating for the *Proto-gospel of James*, since the earliest extant manuscript dates to the fourth century and it seems that some second and early third century writers (Clement and Origen) were familiar with the story. George Zervos suggests some part of the gospel may date to the first century: "An Early Non-Canonical Annunciation Story," *SBL Seminar Papers* 36 (1997): 686. On the *Proto-gospel of James* in relationship to patristic writers, see P. A. van Stempvoort, "The *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, the Sources of

scene symptomatizes the considerable colonial and diasporic pressures of ethnographic culture, and the story stages this process of intense scrutiny of the body and its visible signs in order to parlay those signs into an invisible or abstract philosophical truth: in this case, the cultural purity and authenticity of a people.

To set this stunning scene in the *Proto-gospel of James* (20.1–5): the midwife attending Mary’s labor tells a woman named Salome of the strange event she has just witnessed. Impossibly, a virgin has given birth. Incredulous, Salome insists she will not believe it unless she can test for herself. Salome does so, thrusting her finger inside Mary’s body, only for her hand to catch fire on contact.

What is this test about? Rhetorically, it clearly warns readers not to question Mary’s virginity. We can also locate this text within the growing tendency in antiquity to associate virginity with a precise physical condition—a medicalization of virginity.²⁹ The episode comes in the context of a text that is not just heavily preoccupied with Mary’s purity but also structured by it.³⁰ The story is almost singularly focused on how Mary’s defilement would have been impossible, illustrating at length how she is both ritually pure and physically intact.³¹ In one case, her purity is “so exceptional that it no longer requires the ritual practice of post-partum purification,” as Lily Vuong puts it.³²

Scholarship has generally cast the *Proto-gospel of James* as unequivocally Christian. Yet both Vuong and Tim Horner, who puts this text in conversation with the teachings on womanhood and virginity in the Mishnah, provide strong evidence that *James* should be understood in a Jewish/Judean

Its Theme and Style and Their Bearing on Its Date,” in *Studia Evangelica*, ed. F. Cross, vol. 3, *Texte und Untersuchungen* 88 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), 412–23.

29. Jodi Pinault, “The Medical Case for Virginity in the Early Second Century CE: Soranus of Ephesus *Gynecology* 1.32,” *Helios* 19 (1992): 123–39; Julie Kelto Lillis, “Paradox in *Partu*: Verifying Virginity in the *Protoevangelium of James*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24 (2016): 1–28. Lillis notes that there is no evidence until the third century that “virginity inspections” by midwives took place; Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Cyprian, for instance, all reference the practice of inspecting women’s bodies to “verify” virginity and even then do not tend to trust the practice (“Paradox in *Partu*,” 12).

30. Lily Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). See also Mary F. Foskett, “Virginity as Purity in the *Protoevangelium of James*,” in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (New York: Bloomsbury / T&T Clark, 2005), 67–76.

31. Though, as Lillis has noticed, physical virginity as defined by the (erroneous) notion of an intact hymen is anachronistic for a second-century text (“Paradox in *Partu*,” 9–10).

32. Vuong, *Gender and Purity*, 243.

context.³³ It is not only a midrashic elaboration of the infancy stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke but also a show of intensified Judean investments, including menstrual purity, the Temple, and proper sacrifice.³⁴ Indeed *James's* embellished focus on the Temple might be another point of resonance with the Mishnah, which, as Naftali Cohn has argued, belongs to a larger set of tendencies and discourses in the second and third centuries, particularly pertaining to reimagining the Temple and its meanings. The Temple was an ongoing living, and orienting, force shaped for authorization and self-representation, even beyond the Judean sphere, but funded within Judean cultures by particular challenges and colonial pressures following the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt and the building of Aelia Capitolina over the ruins of Jerusalem.³⁵

Virginia Burrus has shown that virginity as a narrative device, at least in the ancient novels, can work to entertain and lampoon colonial power relations, as well as to negotiate the ambiguities of cultural and ethnic identifications.³⁶ Virginity's meanings for colonial, ethnic, and racialized belonging may extend beyond the literary world of the novels, however, especially given the growing interest in medicalized virginity in Late Antiquity, within the longue durée of colonialism in the Mediterranean.³⁷ We might also consider Sharon Jacob's work on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke (more on that below), which places investments in Mary's virginity more explicitly within the real-world dynamics of racial and colonial population (re)production.³⁸

33. Timothy J. Horner, "Jewish Aspects of the *Protoevangelium of James*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004): 313–35; Vuong, *Gender and Purity*; Vuong, "Purity, Piety, and the Purposes of the *Protoevangelium of James*," in *'Non-canonical' Religious Texts in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James H. Charlesworth (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 205–21.

34. Again, for comprehensive treatment, see Vuong, *Gender and Purity*.

35. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

36. Burrus, "Mimicking Virgins."

37. See the classics: Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

38. Jacob's work has inspired much of my ongoing thinking on colonialism and reproduction in antiquity; see Sharon Jacob, *Reading Mary alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers: Violent Love, Oppressive Liberation, and Infancy Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Jacob, "Imagined Nations, Real Women: Politics of Culture and Women's Bodies. A Postcolonial,

So, we can imagine *The Proto-gospel of James* as part of Judean diasporic cultural and colonial negotiations, not solely as a Christian text that evinces a particular ideological interest in Mary's virginity and Jesus's uniquely divine status. This is not to reduce the text's various literary and social relationships and investments. It is rather to keep those relationships (ironically against the aspirations of the text) complex and unresolved, allowing us to more easily see how this text carries in it questions of authenticity and belonging that characterize diasporic and colonial circumstances. Placing this scene within these contexts, we can see how individual bodies are expected to carry the burden of larger questions of peoplehood and population.

The *Proto-gospel of James* suggests for us the social and cultural work that graphic and medicalized descriptions of gendered bodies perform for those who generate them. When belonging is most unsure is usually when the burden of proof rests most concretely on individual bodies to fortify populations and peoples, and to demonstrate what counts as authentically (purely, unambiguously) belonging to this or that people. *The Proto-gospel of James* offers us an extended drama of this dynamic through Mary. What's more, in the scene with Salome's virginity test, Mary both emphatically passes the test of ethnic or diasporic authenticity (i.e., cultural purity) and, in her body's fiery resistance to scrutiny, reminds the reader of the blurriness—and the danger—at the very core of the enterprise.

There is also perhaps more to think about her body's resistance. The scene not only describes the virginity test quite graphically (perhaps ethnopornographically) but also emphasizes Mary's body as an impenetrable mystery. Her body's fiery refusal might be understood as a response to a hegemonic, ethnographic gaze, one that perhaps fantasizes a subjective space preserved from not only impure cultural influences (borrowing from Burrus) but also colonial and imperial scopic vision. Mary's body resists scrutiny in this scene, a kind of ethnographic refusal, even while the rest of the story makes clear to the reader that she would pass any test.³⁹ Mary, as subject, is both verified and deemed beyond scrutiny.

Feminist, and Indo-Western Interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:8–15,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 407–16; Sharon Jacob and Jennifer T. Kaalund, “Flowing from Breast to Breast: An Examination of Dis/Placed Motherhood in African American and Indian Wet Nurses,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 209–38.

39. On the concept of ethnographic refusals, see Audra Simpson *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

The point then is not simply to say that gender was a product of racializing and colonial pathologies in antiquity and move on. It is to notice that our understanding of what certain texts, practices, and imaginations do or express *changes* when we know that the graphic interest in women's bodies is part of longer-running cultural gestures of ethnographic and medical discourses. The importance of Mary in Christian history for articulating gendered ideals makes this an especially charged example for thinking about something like the anatomization of ethnic or racialized belonging. In other words, this episode, as it resonates against the history of racialized pathologization, invites us to redescribe the landscape of gendered subjective physiology in the ancient Mediterranean. Among other things, it will help us better apprehend the social forces that histories of religion have so often obscured.

THE MODERN ETHNOGRAPHY OF GENDER

To return to the original question of this essay: What makes gender as an object of study possible? In short, gender in modernity has not only been formative of racializing frameworks; it also has emerged "itself" at the cost of analyses of and resistance to such racial and colonial frameworks. A large number of studies within Black, Indigenous, and postcolonial feminisms and transgender studies have described both dimensions of this dynamic.

Perhaps the fullest account of the production of gender within racial schemas is S. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, which charts a modern history of gender as itself a racial arrangement. Transness is less an identity for Snorton and more a "movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival," with Blackness creating its conditions of possibility.⁴⁰ Snorton addresses North American medical literature of the 19th century to demonstrate how gynecology, especially the now well-known developments and experiments in women's medicine developed by James Marion Sims, was a racial science.⁴¹

As Deirdre Cooper Owens has also shown at length, gynecology itself was in part founded in this period to increase the reproductive capacity of enslaved women by "fixing" the injuries to their bodies that occurred with

40. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

41. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, chapter 1. Compatible with Snorton's work is Marquis Bey's *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

the severe bodily violence of enslavement. Enslaved women's bodies were treated as less disposable because they were needed to produce enslaved children, especially after the law prohibiting further importation of enslaved people into the United States.⁴² But the inside of the body also proved to be a point of difficulty for gynecological medicine. Indeed reproductive medicine was "one of the foremost fields in which the failures of race science were revealed," according to Cooper Owens. "Once doctors examined, excised, and sometimes preserved black women's sexual organs in jars, how could they accurately detect whether a burst ovary or a small cervix belonged to a black woman or a white woman?"⁴³

Resonant with Cooper Owens, but more explicitly working within the framework of biopolitics, Kyla Schuller illustrates how social ambiguities were worked out through anatomical description, with not only racial categories but also the gender binary as the major legacies. Schuller's history of 19th-century medical imaginations deals with the discourse of impressibility—the ability to be responsive or affected. Schuller demonstrates how gynoneurological imaginings of the vagina as an especially impressible organ that had a kind of responsiveness and malleability about it were a crucial part of defining the civilized subject, which was defined in a racial hierarchy. This gynecological work, done not least by white women doctors, was knit into the political category of woman as the subject of "women's rights" in the 19th-century. "The very category of woman," Schuller writes, "is itself a racialized concept, one born of the impulses to differentiation and hierarchization of affective capacity characteristic of nineteenth-century biopower."⁴⁴ She continues, "Woman marks neither an interiority nor an individuated, independent subject—indeed there is no discrete identity in impressibility regimes,

42. Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2018). According to Cooper Owens, gynecology in the modern era was "being formalized and legitimated on the reproductive organs and bodies of black women" (32). For many of these early gynecologists, race and racialization were not just the pretext of their medical knowledge but also at the center of their medical ruminations. 19th-century race science was constantly working on diagnosing (which is to say producing) human features as physiologically or biologically racial. Cooper refers to the practice of pelvimetry, which measured the size of a woman's pelvis to assess how difficult or easy childbirth would be (23). Pelvimetry was racialized metalanguage that was built on racial presumption and then used to prove through science that certain racial bodies were more suited to be used for enslavement, including reproductive enslavement.

43. Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*, 23.

44. Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the 19th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 103.

only the folding inward of the sensations resultant from coming into contact with the external world. Rather, ‘woman’ represents a tactic of risk management grounded in ideas of relative bodily feeling, responsiveness, and malleability that correlate with the perceived properties of genitalia.”⁴⁵

These histories only underline how the interiority of bodies marked as female—the gynecological imagination, we might say—is a racial one. It is not so hard, then, to see how Mary’s virginity test and, more generally, *ancient* gynecological imaginations are similarly imbued. What’s more, the way the gendered body appears as an object of study in North American modernity through these racialized bio-logics means that any analysis of gender as such carries this charge. As Jodi Byrd writes, the “matter” of gender is always both racial and colonial in that gendered bodies inevitably materialize under these conditions. Indigenous bodies are marked from the get-go as nonnormative, and Indigenous women in particular emerge as synecdoche for the land within a state that is not only heteropatriarchal but raced and gendered as white male.⁴⁶ Likewise, Sarah Haley writes about how Black women’s criminalization works in tandem with their masculinization.⁴⁷

The genealogy of gender as an object of critical analysis in North American academia is heavily indebted to French feminist philosophical thought from the 1960s and 1970s. Take, for example, Judith Butler’s use of Wittig, Irigaray, and Beauvoir in what is one of the most often employed paradigms for cultural constructivist and historicist projects on gender.⁴⁸ In other words, French feminism basically underwrites gender in the North American academy, in which “gender” signifies an ongoing fulfillment of the progressive goals of French feminist theory—with an explicitly queer twist.

45. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*, 103.

46. Jodi A. Byrd, “What Normative Got to Do With It? Toward Indigenous Queer Relationality,” *Social Text* 38 (2020): 105–23. Byrd is referring to Audra Simpson’s article “The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty,” *Theory and Event* 19 (2016). Ann Anlin Cheng’s recent book, *Ornamentalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), likewise demonstrates the way the materiality of Asian women’s bodies is racialized—specifically as Asian women become or are merged with objects of decoration.

47. Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

48. See Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and then *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Of course, these texts of Butler theorize the performativity of gender and gender as “copy with no original,” concepts that may not be cited with regularity anymore in Late Antiquity and early Christian studies, but the assumptions of which have filtered and diffused into a general supposition of the constructedness of gender in different times, places, and sociocultural conditions.

Françoise Vergès's book *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism* puts this intellectual genealogy in a different perspective, however, and offers a fuller history for French feminism of this period. Vergès does so in a way that disrupts any happy stories about gender as progress and triumph. Vergès describes the massive efforts of France to manage and regulate women's bodies and reproduction on the French DOM Reunion Island at roughly the same moment as the appearance of French feminism. Vergès notes that even the term *French feminism* was an effect of institutionalization, and an "invention of the academic world," particularly of gender studies figures in North America in the 1990s: the nationalism of French feminism was not part of the 1970s feminist work in France.⁴⁹ But even so, France's place in colonial reproductive regulation of and violence against women was absent in nearly all feminist analyses of the workings of patriarchy. Vergès argues that this absence is a result of these thinkers who, even while they were critical of empire, imagined French colonialism as situated in the past. This "disremembering," as Vergès puts it, meant that feminism in France in the 1970s was easily swept up into the nationalist project of crafting a progressive French Republic. This was a republic in which capitalism was the instrument of women's liberation and thus the guarantor of France's modernization.⁵⁰ French feminists and (white) second wave feminism in the 1960s through the 1980s were mutually defining and subscribed to a universalism that seemed incapable of managing the critiques articulated by (especially) post-colonial and Black feminists.⁵¹

As all these scholars have shown, the white, nationalist, and capitalist pretext to gender requires that those of us who make use of gender as an analytic reckon with the ways predominantly white academic fields and disciplines with colonial roots (classics, ancient religion, early Christian studies, Late Antiquity) have employed gender as both a forcefield of political aspiration and a guard against more thoroughgoing politicization.

Another thread in this story is one of the most well-known contributions of Black feminist thought: intersectionality. Indebted to and largely associated with Black feminist intellectual histories, intersectionality arose to name the particular forms of vulnerability and invisibility that racially minoritized women are subjected to. Its indispensability for characterizing lived

49. Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 113.

50. Vergès, *Wombs of Women*, 99–101.

51. Vergès, *Wombs of Women*, 105–7.

conditions of erasure within multiple colluding systems of power is clear. But its configuration within predominantly white fields and institutions serving white interests is worth some scrutiny.

Intersectionality now appears as central to any identity-based analyses or critiques, but particularly those grounded in the categories of gender and sexuality. (“Our analyses must be intersectional.”) The centrality of intersectionality by now is remarkable and crucial. But it is not unambivalent, since it has become central not only to intellectual work but also to institutional discourses—diversity initiatives, hiring practices, programming, institutional self-promotion. In other words, it has been taken up as an ostensible fix for white institutions, including North American institutional feminism’s infamous whiteness.

The institutional utility of intersectionality is not incidental to its epistemology. Jasbir Puar has observed how intersectionality is not necessarily a flawless way to conceptualize subjects as they are bound to various forces, often tensive and mutually inflected, of power and belonging. Intersectionality still imagines an identity in manageable, separable pieces, ones that only *come to intersect*, and thus ones that can be “disassembled.”⁵² She writes,

Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between the various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the frictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space. Furthermore, the study of intersectional identities often involves taking imbricated identities apart one by one to see how they influence each other, a process that betrays the founding impulse of intersectionality.⁵³

52. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 212. Her proposal as complementary counterpoint to identity-based paradigms is the Deleuzian assemblage, a “series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks,” that “draw together, enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and non-organic forces” (212). She suggests that intersectionality and assemblage remain in tension with one another, in which intersectional identities “are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility” (213). It should be noted that Puar has emphasized that she is not claiming that intersectionality and other identity-based analytics be replaced with notions of affect/assemblage. She is rather suggesting that they be thought together. See especially Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 212–13, and Puar’s interview with Oishik Sircar in *Humanity* 11.3 (2021), <http://humanityjournal.org/issue11-3/a-deep-and-ongoing-dive-into-the-brutal-humanism-that-undergirds-liberalism-an-interview-with-jasbir-k-puar>.

53. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 212.

As Puar suggests, intersectionality can be a “tool of diversity management and a mantra of liberal multiculturalism” that “colludes with the disciplinary apparatus of the state—census, demography, racial profiling, surveillance.”⁵⁴

All paradigms have limits and ambivalences, and again, the critique here is not of intersectionality itself, or all its uses, and certainly not of its originary impulses which we have yet to fully actualize and heed. It is rather that we must notice that intersectionality, depending on its deployment, can contribute both to political aspirations and, when circumscribed by neoliberal diversity interests, to safeguards against thoroughgoing politicization. In Jennifer Nash’s history of intersectionality, especially its life within and emerging from Black feminism, she notices that the mainstreaming of intersectionality meant that it has lost its grounding in juridical frameworks. (Crenshaw, a legal scholar, is one of intersectionality’s points of origin.) She argues that academic feminism has leaned too heavily on intersectionality, and on Black women themselves, to “save” justice projects from their whiteness. This condition creates toxic effects on Black women and limits the scope of potential contributions of Black feminist theory. As Nash writes in her conclusion, “Some of Us Are Tired”: “This narrative—one where black feminism’s primary task is to discipline white feminism and women’s studies—has produced defensiveness as the hallmark of the felt life of US academic black feminism.”⁵⁵

While intersectionality has appeared less centrally (and less urgently) in ancient historical studies of gender—not to our credit—it is indeed often evoked as a solution and salvific analytical move for a predominantly white field of study. Because of its institutional currency and salvific uses, we need to be wary of how certain deployments of intersectionality might lead us away from its foundational questions of juridically produced vulnerability and erasure, and more toward simply diversifying gender as an object of study. In other words, perhaps it is less the emphasis on racially minoritized women’s experience that many of us in the field are interested in and more

54. Puar, 212.

55. Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 136. Nash notes that Puar’s critique sparked controversy. She suggests the identification between Black feminism and intersectionality has meant a kind of territorial defense of the concept that she both sympathizes with (given the exploitation and erasure of Black women’s labor in the academy) and sees as limiting, and even potentially destructive. She continues, “Defensiveness is a form of obstructed agency, something that hinders black feminism’s theoretical and political imagination rather than unleashing it” (137). She argues for a more expansive history of Black feminism’s creativity and intellectual work.

the (problematic) equivalence it can stage between race and gender. But rather than trying to diversify gender, we might instead pay greater attention to the racialized production of gender. We might ask how gender as such comes to us and what gender does and doesn't do.

GENDER AS ASPIRATIONAL POLITICAL PROGRAM

These histories, ancient and modern, reorient us to the very object at the heart of studies of gender as a category of historical analysis. What then do we make of gender as a critical and political program? What is and is not possible?

As Robyn Wiegman has shown, *gender*, once simply coextensive with *women*, has come to aggregate a number of subfields and interests (masculinity studies, women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, trans studies, queer theory). Wiegman argues convincingly that *gender*, especially as evolving from women's studies and entangled with critiques of the simultaneously exclusionary and universalizing *women*, has come to represent a kind of expansiveness, a "progress narrative" in which "*gender* overcomes the impasses of *women*" and thus makes up for its failures.⁵⁶ Wiegman scrutinizes the implicit and idealized political hopes of gender as object of study—to both carry on the progressive work that feminism wanted to do and overcome its exclusions—not because political aspirations are bad (at all) but because our faith in such objects for justice-seeking projects is a burden no single framework can bear.⁵⁷ At the end of her chapter she wonders, What happens when gender, too, inevitably fails?

I would argue (approximately a decade after Wiegman published her book) that *gender* has failed. We are in that moment. But let's pause on the specific politics of historical work on gender in ancient contexts. What are the political aspirations of that work? How can we be more present to both those political aspirations and what they may inoculate us against? Intellectual work at large already has an uncertain and contested relationship to political agency. This is true even when that work is speaking to and about the political present, informed by activism, etc. But what about historical work on antiquity? What are we doing when we memorialize women lost to the historical record, when we scrutinize binary gender presumptions or

56. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), chapter 1, especially p. 78.

57. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 90–91.

highlight their undoing, or when we queer figures from the past, for example? It would be impossible to quantify and measure all the effects—subtle or otherwise—of this work. But we must, among other things, notice the relative safety of such work, the way speaking in the register of history removes us from the urgency of such politics. But it doesn't necessarily need to: I would want to leave the question of urgency and politics in history open for reconceptualization. I am simply observing that much (though not all) of what historical work that is informed by politicized critique does is mute politicized critique in the transfer, mostly under the rubric of updating our pictures of those pasts.

I also want to observe that one significant dimension of what gender as a historical analytic has done is provide a field of identification for those of us who learn and teach about this material.⁵⁸ At the same time, gender has become thoroughly entangled with diversity and inclusion politics within contemporary academic fields and institutions. In other words, to renegotiate the past with questions of women, gender, and queerness in the foreground was and is, at least in part, an opportunity for the inclusion of those critics who brandished them, both by implicit proxy (I see myself in ancient people, I appear in history, etc.) and by carving out new space in academic institutions. As Carly Daniel-Hughes has illustrated so beautifully, this fantasy of justice-making within the feminist academy, for instance, can easily and often obscure the hierarchies and other power plays within academic life under the guise of shared belonging or political positioning.⁵⁹

These entanglements do not evaporate the political currency from that work; they do however reveal that work (again, work I have also done) to have some fairly conservative designs behind it. The “possibility of subverting and displacing” naturalized notions of gender that is the hope of Butler's own multi-field-shaping work (and notice the term *possibility*) has been taken quite seriously in ancient history and the history of Christianity in particular. Queerness in the study of ancient Christianity, for instance, has supplied a frame that offers the political potential of disrupting some of Christianity's long-held investments in normative gender and sexuality by finding queerness

58. See, for instance, Joan Wallach Scott, *Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), in which she describes the psychodynamics of identification between women historians and the subjects they study, which inadvertently ends up stabilizing gender across time.

59. Carly Daniel-Hughes, “Mary Magdalene and the Fantasy Echo: Reflections on the Feminist Historiography of Early Christianity,” in *Re-Making the World: Christianity and Categories*, ed. Taylor Petrey (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 135–58.

circulating within Christianity. This critical move also—and not coincidentally—tacitly cooperates with Christian exceptionalisms that have imagined Christianity to be uniquely culturally subversive.⁶⁰

Postcolonial, Black, and Indigenous feminist as well as transgender studies scholars have long observed the different ways gender politics and sexual politics can often be quite friendly to neoliberal, nationalist, colonial, and racial capitalist causes.⁶¹ For instance, upward mobility and recognition for a narrow constituency of women or queer-identified folks have been acquired by attaching to or aligning with dominant structures and institutions. Institutions, corporations, and nations are always proud to advertise their progress on gender and sexuality politics, especially when it provides a cover for other forms of violence and exclusion. And the beneficiaries of these minor adjustments within institutions, corporations, and nations are only too happy to accept the favor in the name of justice. The association of analytics of gender with progress and inclusion might even provide an alibi for those of us who do it as we find ourselves more than occasionally swept up into racist institutional, nationalist, and colonial structures.

Even if scholars of antiquity are aware of the contemporary politics and workings of gender within neoliberal or nationalist frameworks, gender itself still appears as one of the sturdiest pieces of interpretive and historical machinery, one that looks *progressive enough* without transgressing unmarked white suppositions, or institutional and disciplinary conservatisms. It allows those of us in the field to be *political enough* as we fight, often for the incredibly modest goal of gender as a legitimate object of study. Indeed, the fact that many of us are continuously forced to wage even this modest fight is by design: it distracts from more thoroughgoing critiques of institutions and

60. See Kotrosits, “The Queer Life of Christian Exceptionalism,” *Culture and Religion* 15 (2014): 158–65.

61. The list of books on this topic are innumerable. In addition to books already cited, some examples from various perspectives include Aren Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Bernstein, *Brokered Subjects: Sex, Trafficking, and the Politics of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and the recent issue of *Social Text*, “Left of Queer,” 38 (2020). The very legitimate, and even now predominant, critique of neoliberal trajectories of queer politics that has emerged in North American queer theory circles should not obscure that neoliberalism is not the only potential vector for queer politics, as argued in Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

power. We become professionalized through gender critique, rather than questioning the very politics of our professionalization.⁶²

I don't want to undermine the enormous amount of energy and work devoted to feminist space-making and gender inclusivity in academia generally and in the field of Late Antiquity in particular. Neither am I being flippant about the precarity that underlies it. I also want to affirm both the fortitude and the vulnerability of Blossom Stefaniw's recent essay in this very journal, "Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past."⁶³ I sympathize with its unvarnished take on the very gendered perils of professional history and life in academia. My own experience has attuned me to them (to vastly understate it). But holding all of that to be true, and to echo Stefaniw's lyrical ache to remake the field, I think it is also important for those of us in the field who are white women to become more present to our own ironies and self-interests, to understand, first, how very unexceptional the violence against us has been. And second, to ask what it means to defend a place in a field, to defend analytic objects, or to defend particular modes of work, and to do so in the name of justice. Indeed, if Nash finds academic Black feminism to be forced into a posture of defensiveness, we might likewise notice how academic white feminism has no less made defensiveness its hallmark, only with vectors much more menacing.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

That objects of study fail to do all the work we want them to do, Wiegman notes, is not necessarily their fault. And the failure of objects does not make them useless. It is rather that we cannot rely on gender to do the politics for us. To close, then, I want to set out some terms on which we might continue making gender as an object of study useful—that is, to sketch out how to live with this failed object in a way that does not rescue it but still unsettles its conservatism and institutionalization. Whatever else we are doing with gender, countering these conservatism will surely require us to attend to the

62. To be clear, historical work is always political, in that it doesn't operate outside of social relations and histories of power; history is located and epistemologically loaded. At the same time, I don't think the richness and potentialities (political or otherwise) of historical work are determined by any overtly political interests. But gender is, from its inception, a politicized analytic, so it requires us to stay with the specifically political implications of its employment.

63. Stefaniw, "Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4, no. 3 (2020): 260–83.

64. With thanks to Carly Daniel-Hughes on this point.

scene(s) of gender's production and extrication from race and colonialism. Gender will also have to be scrutinized heavily for the way it can lend credence to liberal causes that are decidedly not abolitionist and anticolonial projects. Those of us who evoke gender will also need to have on our horizon forms of justice that are far beyond the bourgeois goal of inclusion into academic fields, institutions, or dominant histories.

Emphatically, this is not an argument to stop talking about gender. In fact, because gender is a key conduit for the racialized manufacturing and management of collectives and bodies, its significance is undeniable. Rather I'm pressing us to ask: What does the project of historicizing gender, as it is currently configured, accomplish? This question is not casual. It points to some conundrums that attend the historicization and deployment of so many analytics with politicized aspirations at their roots: if gender itself can no longer be safe and secure politics, those of us who use it will need to decide whether it is the politics or the security that we want. We may wonder aloud which of those was driving us in the first place. ■