

## Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past

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**ABSTRACT** Two recently-published works involved in the representation of women in the Christian past show two contemporary but divergent historiographic modes. The following essay examines each study within a larger frame of inquiry as to how patriarchy continues to shape both the institutional and embodied orders within which feminist historiography of early Christianity and Late Antiquity takes place. Using Critical Race Theory as the best available perspective from which to engage with systems of oppression, I articulate certain revisions which should be made to current efforts towards equality and consider what it would mean to write feminist historiography as counter-narrative or counter-storytelling without that becoming a decorative or extra-curricular practice in the academy. When feminist historiography is treated simultaneously in institutional, embodied, and epistemic terms it becomes evident that the way we think about women is part of a high-stakes conflict around the use of the past. **KEYWORDS** feminism, historiography, early Christianity, methodology, interdisciplinary, gender, race

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In 1984, Rosemary Radford Ruether delivered the annual lecture to the American Academy of Religion. She opened by responding to the title prompt asking whether feminism and theology have a future together. For Ruether, that question is just as grotesque as looking for a shared future for Jews and anti-Semites or for white supremacists and Black people. Any theology which assumes itself to be something separate from feminism, treating feminism as a gratuitous, trivial, or extra-curricular concern, is necessarily a patriarchal theology, adversarial to women in general and feminism in particular.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of Ruether's lecture is devoted to setting out a program for reforming the academic study of theology. Ruether identifies three tasks required of the scholarly

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1. This annual lecture was a significant intervention in the landscape of academic theology at the time and was originally titled "Theology and Feminism: a Future Together." The published version is "The Future of Feminism and Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53.4 (1985): 703–713. In this essay I use the term "women" to include all female-identified persons, with the awareness that many of the issues I will discuss also apply to non-binary, trans, and queer people in general.

community. To integrate feminism with theology and stop doing patriarchal theology, scholars must execute (1) a critique of androcentrism; (2) the retrieval of alternate woman-centered traditions; and (3) a revision of theological norms and methods so as to define and develop a non-patriarchal and truly feminist theology.<sup>2</sup> The lecture ends on the following note:

The future of feminist theology is hopeful, but it is not assured in our generation. What is assured is that its questions cannot be finally repressed, because the humanity of women cannot finally be repressed. Thus the questions of feminist theology may be marginalized and silenced for a season, only to be recalled and remembered again, until the tradition itself submits to being questioned and transformed into a new creation, no longer patriarchal, but truly a human and humanizing theology.<sup>3</sup>

35 years later, this optimistic outlook has a bitter quaintness. The generation to which Ruether refers has indeed passed. Contemporary discourse on women in the academy has shifted from the legitimacy of feminist theology to confrontation with much darker realities of academic patriarchy: the ongoing and unresolved institutionalization of assault, harassment, exclusion, and discrimination.<sup>4</sup> While there are now more women involved in the study of early Christianity, patriarchal theology continues apace. Theological institutions which overtly restrict the rights and personhood of women and queer folk are still legal. Their representatives and presses continue to be welcomed into key academic institutions in the field.<sup>5</sup> While more and more scholars

2. Ruether, "Future of Feminism," 703.

3. Ruether, "Future of Feminism," 713.

4. Carol Anderson (*White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2016]) documents this non-coincidental pattern of moments of apparent progress being followed by exacerbated projects of exclusion including both physical violence but also legal and procedural attempts to resolve a perceived disruption of a proper balance of power. On this principle, it would appear that the darkening shift I have named above is consistent with observable patterns of reaction to even the most superficial concessions of inclusion in, in this case, academic spaces marked as male. For documentation of ongoing misogynistic practices in the academy in general, with a focus on theology and religious studies, see Kelly J. Baker, *Sexism Ed: Essays on Gender and Labor in Academia* (Chapel Hill, NC: Raven Books, 2018). Baker draws statistics on the citation gap, for example, from Kieran Healy, "Gender Divides in Philosophy and Other Disciplines," *Crooked Timber* (blog), February 4, 2011, <https://crookedtimber.org/2011/02/04/gender-divides-in-philosophy-and-other-disciplines/>; Daniel Maliniak, Ryan Powers, and Barbara F. Walter, "The Gender Citation Gap in International Relations," *Internal Organization* 67:4 (August 28, 2013); B.F. Walter, "How to Reduce the Gender Gap in One (Relatively) Easy Step," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2013.

5. For theological institutions actively promoting patriarchy and the impact of such policies on women in academia, see for example Sarah Jones's article on the Southwestern Baptist Theological

actively strive for parity in their citation, invitation, hiring, and collaboration practices, nothing remotely close to gender parity has been achieved in the study of Late Antiquity, with theology and religious studies in a particularly egregious state.<sup>6</sup> While the field has a much larger array of methods at its disposal and is now significantly more theoretically informed than when Ruether spoke in 1984, resources from critical theory (including feminist theory) have only been integrated by part of the field. Rather than an overall reform of theology, disciplines concerned with late ancient religion, including theology, religious studies, and early Christian studies, have split and currently exist in alternate if often colliding academic universes.<sup>7</sup> Not insignificantly, diverging methodological customs or theoretical allegiances correlate with diverging levels of collusion with patriarchy and commitment to the intellectual habits and academic customs entailed by it. Here we see the complex interactions of embodied, institutional, and epistemic orders.

In surveying this landscape and noting the numerous efforts towards equality which have been undertaken in the academy since then, it is remarkable that the public discourse on women in the academy has shifted not into the sunny uplands indicated by Ruether's closing comment, but into a much more sinister register. What is at stake is no longer just the still-outstanding respect for and inclusion of feminist approaches, but the basic physical, economic, and professional survival of academic women.<sup>8</sup> This is all the more astonishing given that discussions of

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Seminary in the New Republic: <https://newrepublic.com/article/148609/religious-rights-metoo-reckoning-coming> (accessed 26 May 2020). On the ongoing involvement of major scholarly societies with explicitly homophobic and misogynistic institutions, see for example the discussion chronicled by Matthew Neujahr here: <https://betterbs.wordpress.com/2017/04/06/thoughts-on-academic-freedom-from-the-new-england-regional-sbl-2017/?fbclid=IwAR2qbCgNkXNDod3Qzc9gzmQMISHWmirSfBEzJAobxqot-clnydPABnjZesY> (accessed 26 May 2020).

6. For a report on gender discrimination in TRS (theology and religious studies) in the UK, see M. Guest, S. Sharma, and R. Song, *Gender and Career Progression in Theology and Religious Studies* (Durham, UK: Durham University, 2013), who note that harassment and discrimination effectively exclude women from proceeding up the academic ranks in representative numbers beyond the PhD or post-doctoral level.

7. For an overview of various methodological commitments, see the forum organized by Heidi Marx and Ellen Muehlberger, "Late Antiquity and the New Humanities: an Open Forum" *Marginalia*, September 16, 2015, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/late-antiquity-and-the-new-humanities-an-open-forum/> (accessed 26 May 2020).

8. For an example of decades-long systems of physical assault and harassment, see Elaine Pagels' autobiographical account in *Why Religion?* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 24–26, discussed further below.

sexism and gender discrimination participate in a narrative of progress according to which those raising issues of misogyny in the academy are often exhorted to temper their outrage in the face of reminders that it used to be much worse. This claim may or may not be counterfactual: I have no way of measuring the net horror experienced by women and queer folk, as well as people of color who are also negatively impacted by patriarchy, in the academy at regular two-decade intervals. It is not insignificant that the archive does not readily admit of this type of research. What is certainly the case is that this system of oppression operates in parallel with other systems of oppression, especially racism: the call to appreciate the progress that has already been made, or to remain modest, tame, and grateful in one's demands for change are reminiscent of mainstream responses to the civil rights movement.<sup>9</sup> That being the case, and given the current eruption of conflict around the basic civil rights of Black people in the face of ongoing police brutality, it is appropriate to draw on insights from Critical Race Theory again, 35 years later, considering how to do feminist historiography within a persistently patriarchal, racist, and misogynistic academic world.<sup>10</sup>

It is not the case that we are on a steady course of progress towards justice and righteousness. Black intellectuals have known that for a long time.<sup>11</sup> Feminist scholars need a notional apparatus separate from narratives of progress on which to plot our ongoing experience of sexism and misogyny in the academic world. Feminist scholars of religion in Late Antiquity will have to draw on resources from other disciplines, because our own subject area is too closely enmeshed with Christianity, which in turn has historically been and still is closely enmeshed with dehumanizing racial and gendered orders. Methodology that assumes progress and good will, which assumes that everything is all right, is necessarily ineffectual,

9. Connecting anti-patriarchal and anti-racist work and thought is not novel, but it is a connection which white feminists like myself have historically failed to make. A considerable section of Critical Race Theory developed in dialogue with feminist organizing, especially drawing on Black and other women of color feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlè Crenshaw, Audre Lorde and bell hooks. For a summary, see Katherine M. Bell, "Critical Race Theory," *Feminist Media Histories* 4.2 (2018): 57–60.

10. For a general introduction and history of CRT, see the introduction to the volume commonly known as "The Red Book": Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

11. This contradiction of the narrative of progress is a core tenant of Derrick Bell's legal thought and is illustrated for example in his essay, "Racial Realism" in Crenshaw et al. eds., *Critical Race Theory*, 302–312, and from a more theological perspective in Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope" in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.1 (2015): 215–248. The work of bell hooks has also thoroughly challenged the notion of modernity or progress as justice.

because it necessarily cooperates with a patriarchal order.<sup>12</sup> Patriarchy is not just unethical, it is counterfactual. It is impossible to be a good scholar while also fostering and participating in misogynistic, homophobic, androcentric, and racist orders. Feminist work in the academy is not a matter of trying and trying to get ourselves on screen. It is a matter of walking away. If actors move far enough out of the shot the camera has to move.

We do feminist historiography in the face of persistent institutionalized misogyny in the very academy which is supposed to be our intellectual home, where academic patriarchy is domestic violence. How do we live and think around, through, and beyond such intimate wickedness?

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Critical Race Theory names the many traps which await anyone trying to think beyond systems of oppression with clarity and courage. The multi-racial work of feminist historiography and the legal scholarship at the basis of CRT share significant features. Both are disciplines which interpret texts, use the past, and represent human behavior, ambitions, and ideas for good or ill. Both are fundamentally concerned with storytelling. Both examine how stories are told within a specific imagined world which operates according to particular rules. Both labor to articulate what sort of world we are using the past *in*, and both call on us to question what sort of a world we use the past *for*. CRT proceeds on the basis of five core tenets. These can be notionally separated into three that unveil the structure of white supremacy and, by analogy, patriarchy (permanence, interest convergence, and property) and two that name how scholars and other responsible parties should act (critique of liberalism and counter-storytelling).

I am a white woman and am aware that my approach can be read as a suggestion that white women should take the intellectual resources of Black scholars and use them for our own purposes. White women have historically been particularly complicit in sustaining patriarchy and white supremacy. We have disregarded and betrayed Black and of-color women, putting our own convenience and the program of racial superiority ahead of gender solidarity, so this discomfort is warranted. At the same time, racism and the racist imaginary are not only relevant to Black people or people of color more generally. Everyone has always been involved in racism, so Critical Race Theory

12. Quite apart from the ethical and political problems with this stance, there are numerous methodological pitfalls as outlined in Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 22–59.

applies to everything, including Late Antiquity. Likewise, feminism is not only relevant to able, middle-class straight white women in prosperous countries since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Everyone has always been involved in patriarchy, so feminism applies to everything, including Late Antiquity.

Further, white supremacy and patriarchy are not discrete entities: each enables the other and each is inextricably entangled with the other. Using Critical Race Theory to think about feminist historiography does not constitute an assertion that exposure to patriarchy is the same as exposure to anti-Blackness, nor that white supremacy and patriarchy are identical, nor that there are no individuals on this earth who are self-proclaimed anti-racists while also homophobic or misogynist, and certainly not that there are no self-proclaimed feminists who are also racist. My use of CRT does constitute an assertion that white supremacy and patriarchy share the same core structure of organizing human bodies hierarchically in order to glorify, empower, and materially benefit one type of body at the expense of the other, combined with similar mechanisms of social, economic, and physical oppression which are able to operate because of a reigning discourse which normalizes hierarchized violence on specific gendered or racialized terms. In the religious realm, both systems are often based on a notion of divine order, so that it is appropriate to examine the historiography of religion as a potentially lethal use of the past.<sup>13</sup>

Patriarchy is permanent. It is not an accident, nor an intermittent aberration in an otherwise benevolent system. It is the fundamental structure of thought and action, farther down and farther back even than racism or violence or contempt for the poor.<sup>14</sup> Patriarchy is the water we swim in and the air we breathe,

13. For one of many accounts of white women's complicity in white supremacy and patriarchy, including issues of appropriation and repeated failures to "go get your people," see Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), in particular the chapter entitled "White-Girl Tears" (171–200). The reader is likewise referred to the Southern Baptist Convention for a religious institution which is not at all coincidentally both racist and misogynistic, having been founded by slave-holders and most recently embroiled in promoting patriarchal modes of thought and life as a godly order: <https://newrepublic.com/article/148609/religious-rights-metoo-reckoning-coming> (accessed 26 May 2020).

14. Barbara Smuts, "The Evolutionary Origins of Patriarchy," *Human Nature* 6.1 (1995): 1–32, locates the origin of patriarchy in the conflict of interest entailed by the conditions of reproductive success for male and female primates: females are at the greatest advantage if they have mate choice, kin support, and opportunities for homosocial cooperation. Males are at the greatest advantage when mating is coerced and females are isolated from their kin and prevented from cooperating with one another. While this conflict of interest may be biological, it does not follow that unfettered patriarchy is the natural order: Smuts surveys non-human primates and human societies which have navigated this issue in a variety of ways. She suggests that we are able to create social environments which mitigate this

a poison which has propelled each step required to arrive in our present calamitous state. If all this is the case, then scholarship on women, gender, and sexuality is high-stakes scholarship. It matters how we think about women. It matters whether we can tell whether we are thinking about women or about some other thing. It matters whether we can walk away into some other fugitive territory in order to think with a realer freedom.

Mapping patriarchy onto a narrative of progress towards its inevitable end and taking patriarchy as a permanent state of affairs entail two very different epistemic and ethical dispositions.<sup>15</sup> The narrative of progress is not there because we really are getting significantly better over time. It is ridiculous to talk about progress when the current state of affairs, after three hundred years of effort, is still intolerable. That narrative is in play because it is effective in neutralizing appropriate and efficacious rage.<sup>16</sup> Narratives of progress serve to conceal the superficiality of the changes which have taken place. They suggest that if enough women are hired here and there and if enough books and articles about “women’s issues” are published, the academy will eventually be just and equitable. If I believe in such a reformist approach, I will busy myself with pasting women onto persistently patriarchal scholarly institutions and practices, hoping Marx was right and that there is a point when a change in quantity eventually tips over into a change in quality. Just having more women around and teaching and writing more about women will, over far too much time, shift the academy towards equity. This position is still patriarchal: it treats the continuation of male dominance as fundamentally benign, erasing the conflict and danger entailed by merely adding women into male-dominated spaces; it assumes that it is acceptable for women to do all the work of isolation and exposure as token hires in hostile departments, taking all the

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conflict of interest, building a parallel system which incentivizes collaboration and mutual protection. Most alarming in Smuts’s study is the information that while the males of other primate species also seek to control females’ sexuality, unlike humans, they cannot control females’ access to the basic resources required for survival. In the broader society and especially in the academic environment, female *homo sapiens* can be cut off from resources controlled by males and are thus subject to correspondingly exacerbated pressures and restrictions. We are in more danger than apes.

15. There is increasing scholarly engagement with the question of what a truly feminist future would look like. See for example the essays collected by Ivana Milojevic et al., eds., *Futures* 40.4 (2008, special volume) and more recently Kum-Kum Bhavnani et al., eds., *Feminist Futures: Re-Imagining Women, Culture and Development* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

16. On rage as a feminist and anti-racist instrument, see Cooper, *Eloquent Rage* and Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 25.2 (1997): 278–285.

responsibility to somehow cobble together a place at a table where only poison is served.<sup>17</sup>

A discipline which is striving for justice looks different from one which is only striving to make the minimum number of incremental changes necessary to sustain its own image of righteousness. A discipline which hungers for justice looks a lot different from one which is squirming around trying to get itself off the hook.<sup>18</sup> Equity is not achieved by a fraction of institutions hiring five women to a total of ten faculty positions in 2020, given that the vast majority of institutions had *only* male professors for 500 years. Equity would be hiring *only* female professors for 500 years, and only then gradually shifting to a half-and-half system.<sup>19</sup> Collecting studies on female figures from late ancient religion or collecting female scholars in any given academic institution is not a bad thing to do, but it is far from a proportionate remedy to an outrageous state of affairs. We have been granted such paltry additions and adjustments for 250 years.<sup>20</sup> That process has still not produced an academic world in which

17. For further documentation and discussion of this issue, see among numerous others Kate Mann, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Shirley Nelson Garner et al., eds., *Anti-Feminism in the Academy* (London: Routledge, 1996), and Gillian Howie and Ashley Tauchert, "Feminist Dissonance: The Logic of Late Feminism," in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. S. Gillis, G. Howie, and R. Munford (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 46–58.

18. This institutional dynamic is analyzed in Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

19. It should be noted that even this apparently radical scheme for an equitable academy is unacceptable, because it does not account for non-binary persons. Isolated individual female professors register in the archive from the eighteenth century, while the first universities were founded in Morocco in the ninth century and in Bologna in the eleventh.

20. It is assumed that numerous efforts towards justice are not included in the Western archive and may have begun earlier than movements aimed at basic women's rights, access to higher education, legal personhood, and suffrage in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, preceded by a handful of individual privileged women in the eighteenth century like Laura Bassi, who got a doctoral degree from the University of Bologna at age 21 in 1732; Dorothea Erxleben, who gained access to higher education and Olympe de Gouges writing on the rights of women in her 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of the Female Citizen*; or Mary Wolstonecraft Shelly's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). In the same period, men, including many who were by no means exceptionally gifted, courageous, or privileged, became famous for doing astonishingly stupid and wicked things, such as swooning over the idea of Anglo-Saxons as a superior race (Ralph Waldo Emerson), marching soldiers into the Egyptian desert with no proper water supplies and in wool uniforms (Napoleon Bonaparte), or enslaving and killing hundreds of thousands of people (men too numerous to count here but including King Leopold II of Belgium, Henry Morton Stanley, and Andrew Jackson). This wild lack of proportion in the archive, in which men receive great attention and acclaim for doing insanely irresponsible and violent things, offset by a handful of extraordinarily cautious, educated, circumspect, and remarkably intelligent women who are granted far less acclaim should be some indication of how intellectually and



even the entirely painless and low-stakes act of citation occurs equally. Incrementalism has not produced and cannot ever produce a world in which men can no longer rape or kill us without consequence within the very domestic spaces and heterosexual relationships which continue to be promised to us as our salvation. If incremental additions and adjustments were going to render a just world, we would at present have a much different world around us, a world which does not require constant scrambling for survival.

What has changed so far are those things which *can* change while leaving patriarchy intact. This is the principle of interest convergence: any change held up as an indication of progress is, on closer examination, a net benefit to the dominant party.<sup>21</sup> Programs of inclusion are an example of interest convergence as long as it remains a question of including women in men's spaces at women's own expense and without significantly altering the structures of those spaces. This is a surface form of "progress" which continues to allow men to use women as tools, in this case for getting themselves off the hook. Policies of superficial inclusion provide men with a female body to point to on a panel or a female name in a table of contents or list of speakers. Mere inclusion is sustained patriarchy because it serves the needs of men (seeming progressive, protecting themselves from culpability or accountability) at the expense of women (participating in conferences where they risk harassment and assault and the constant exposure to acts of erasure and belittling, doing unpaid labor to contribute to conference volumes which may not count towards tenure, exposing their work to false allies or overt adversaries who steal or belittle it).

In another example of interest convergence, several academic societies concerned with late ancient religion have put in place sexual harassment and discrimination policies. It is not wrong for these policies to exist, but it is wrong to take them as a viable solution to the sustained and severe problem of harassment. Within institutionalized patriarchy, the adoption of such policies can serve as a decoy. The policies continue to benefit men primarily, and not just

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ethically debauched it is to continue doing patriarchal historiography and how out of proportion with reality it is to try to amend this state of affairs by treating it as a mere imbalance of numbers.

21. CRT addresses the issue of interest convergence primarily in connection with school desegregation and affirmative action cases, in which legislation ultimately was only possible where it advanced the interests of whites, for example in promulgating a "color-blind" notion of racial legislation so that white women became the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action. See Derrick Bell, "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma," in Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory*, 20–28, or Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Race, Reform and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-Discrimination Law," in Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory*, 103–125.

men as a whole, but those men who are perpetrators of sexual harassment, assault, and discrimination. Such policies operate in a structure within which any complaint brought forward costs the complainant more than it does the perpetrator, who rarely if ever sees any appropriate consequences for his actions.<sup>22</sup> Sexual harassment policies protect perpetrators because the costs to the complainant in the mere act of filing a formal complaint are so high that even in cases of notorious perpetrators, academic societies have made themselves unable to act until a formal complaint is made, getting themselves off the hook while sustaining a sense of righteousness to the detriment of the people those policies are nominally meant to serve.

Finally, a more sinister case of interest convergence can be seen in older, high-status male professors who garner a reputation for fostering younger female scholars when they consistently hire a large proportion of female grad students, but in fact do so in order to pursue their own interest in harassing and assaulting people too dependent on them to hold them accountable. Take for example Elaine Pagels' account of Helmut Koester, a man who was respected and protected in the field and influential in her area of study. Koester took credit for accepting female doctoral students but in fact was only doing so in order to form a cadre of dependent and vulnerable persons whom he could assault without consequence.<sup>23</sup> This pattern of apparent promotion but actual violation is ongoing and is enabled by the stark dependence of doctoral students on their advisors throughout academia. It is also enabled by the often unmerited lionizing of older male scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies in particular such that they can operate as if they were no longer beholden to ordinary norms of behavior.

The third concept from CRT comes from the work of Cheryl I. Harris on whiteness as property.<sup>24</sup> Harris argues that whiteness confers tangible benefits and is protected legally in the same manner as property. This notion expands on the more obvious construal of racialized and gendered persons as the property of dominant groups to make a case for whiteness itself as property. Whiteness (or for our purposes, masculinity) renders "reasonable"

22. On problems of complaint see Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), which includes a discussion of sexual harassment complaints in a chapter tellingly entitled "Brick Walls" (135–162). See also her lectures "On Complaint," "Complaint as Diversity Work," and "Complaint as Queer Method," widely available online.

23. Elaine Pagels, *Why Religion?*, 24–26.

24. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory*, 276–291.

expectations of comfort, success, importance, recognition, privilege, and an unimpeachable case for full personhood. As with other property rights, whiteness (masculinity) entails exclusive rights to property functions like possession, use, disposition, transfer, alienability, exclusion, and enjoyment.<sup>25</sup> Jim Crow laws may, on this view, be construed as efforts to protect the enjoyment of whiteness, and to sustain its exclusivity. So are academic customs such as forming networks through late-night drinking among increasingly vulgar groups of men, holding seminars in an older man's home or even his bathroom or otherwise enmeshing professional supervision with domestic life, allowing conference talks to run over time to the detriment of nursing mothers who have scheduled feedings in the stated break times, or equating real academic life with long hours in isolation and silence which are inaccessible to women with caregiving responsibilities.

Given that a proper intellectual or academic is still gendered male, and that knowledge production is part of civil rights, then re-gendering the intellectual or academic is part of feminist work.<sup>26</sup> But if masculinity is property, then it involves expectations to all the comfort, success, importance, recognition, privilege, and an unimpeachable case for full personhood involved with being recognized as the only immediately plausible and legitimate intellectual. The academy is known to be marked as masculine territory, the nice quiet neighborhood in which women are not welcome except in service to men.

The religious past, as one account of what constitutes importance and success and significance, is also wrapped up in masculinity and patriarchy when it continues to be used as a resource which allows patriarchy to keep working.<sup>27</sup> For women to assert themselves as legitimate and important members of the academy, as persons also having a stake in the past, and to re-arrange the narrative of how humanity arrived in its present calamitous state is an act of trespass. It contradicts patriarchy's exclusive rights to the property functions of masculinity like possession, use, disposition, transfer, alienability, exclusion, and enjoyment of the past and its representational social practices and institutions. Within a patriarchal framework, if women wish to write history, they should write either the same history as the men or a decorous, separate, and irrelevant

25. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 280–81.

26. On the effects of such "controlling images" see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1991).

27. See bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) on interaction and differentiation between masculinity and patriarchy.

history about unnecessary women: a history which still serves patriarchy. For women to write their own history with no regard for protecting the “property” of masculinity is as much a trespass as intermarriage, home ownership, civil leadership, or thousands of other acts of Black citizenship have long been considered.

Not only is masculinity (in its aspect here as the intelligence, professionalism, influence, analysis, authority, expertise, rationality, and importance associated with the academy) functioning as property, but women, both contemporary scholars and women in the past, also function as property whose presence and actions should be determined by men and should serve male interests. This is achieved by constraining women in subordinate or dependent roles in academic hierarchies, trivializing or stealing their research, and physically assaulting, harassing and intimidating them so as to mark the academy as masculine space. To ignore or belittle female scholars is to yell “go back where you came from.” Such measures are escalated the more a woman operates independently of masculine agendas, the more she tells her own story, and the more she operates outside of male oversight, whether formal or informal. Like a woman living with an abuser in domestic space, female academics must constantly calculate the risks of their actions and the price of their own humanity, budgeting in a currency of damage to themselves, their livelihoods, and their bodies. One can assume that certain calculations have been made even regarding the writing and printing of these paragraphs.

As a mode of resistance against racism, CRT advocates a critique of liberalism with its focus on individual responsibility and personal agency because of its inattention to structural forces and the resulting concealment of systemic and institutionalized injustice.<sup>28</sup> A (neo)liberal response to patriarchy in the academy would blame women for failing to attain a majority, to publish enough or acquire enough funding so as to become a dominant party, assuming that all of these things would have been possible if each individual woman had tried harder and that the initiation, progression, and consolidation of academic careers take place on a level playing field.

More alarmingly, liberalism also has an epistemological aspect in marking which facts are important and which actions or reactions are acceptable in response to those facts. Academia can function as a means of institutionalizing such epistemic orders. In the present case, knowledge *of women* is structured by

28. Liberalism in this sense is not the opposite of conservatism but rather a set of political, economic, and ideological positions which are especially favored by political conservatives.

patriarchal institutions. Counter-knowledge is inhibited or discarded by those same structures. In terms of academia as a social practice, if patriarchy is structural, then fundamental academic practices of publishing, citation, peer-review, invitations, hiring, mentoring, supervision, and grant acquisition have to be reformed in terms of their structure rather than on a model which explains inequality either through the actions of particularly sexist men or particularly timid women. Likewise, if we treat patriarchy as structural, we have to step into a more challenging intellectual space which requires a great deal of very athletic seeing and unseeing, deliberately asking the wrong questions about the very institutional and epistemic common sense which is concealing ongoing discrimination.

One can publish an anthology on women in early Christianity, because women are marked as a particular, extra-curricular, and unnecessary component of the Christian past. One cannot publish an anthology on men in early Christianity, because men are treated as synonymous with early Christianity, thus rendering such an undertaking tautological. One can form a committee on the status of women in the profession, because the presence of women in the profession is marked as problematic. One cannot form a committee on the status of men in the profession, although that status is certainly alarming from an ethical, social, and epistemological point of view, because the presence of men in the profession is marked as normal and natural.

Keeping this framework in mind, we can now examine two new books on women in early Christianity which belong to two distinct historiographical modes.<sup>29</sup> My first example of a common approach to the study of women in early Christianity comes from the first volume of the collected works of an emeritus professor. Scholarship on this pattern continues in both Europe and North America. The other is the first book/dissertation of a younger female scholar, trained in Norway and integrating contemporary critical theory across traditional disciplinary lines. One might also identify a large segment of contemporary scholarship on women or matters of gender and embodiment in early Christianity in Europe and North America which follows this pattern. While the latter (post-structural) approach is often construed as the solution to the problems presented by the former (traditional) model, I argue that more

29. These two studies were made available to me for review by a book review editor for *Studies in Late Antiquity* and are random representations of each approach which stand in no non-arbitrary relation to me or to one another. The original impetus for this essay was the mere fact that both books appeared to be about early Christian women and could constructively be reviewed together. In fairness to my colleagues, it should be noted that neither author set out to write an exemplary feminist historiography.

radical shifts are necessary if feminist historiography as counter-storytelling is to become possible.

## TWO CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The first study, by Jan Bremmer, bears the title *Magic, Maidens, Martyrs*.<sup>30</sup> It is a title which marks the author's work with a certain exoticism and flair, a hint of sex and violence and mystery. Notice that one tool of mystery is the word "maidens." This tool works, it fits the slot in the screw, because of figures like the Odelisk, of Ophelia, of the very dedicated virgins who are the topic of the other study considered here, a tradition of sexualizing and eroticizing girls and young women. The word "maidens" goes along with the word magic and evokes difference and strangeness and their correlating logics of desire. It goes along with the word "martyrs," because along with the figure of the poor exposed innocent precious (white) virgin, we also have an entire patrimony of images of female bodies experiencing torture, rape, and all forms of violence. That an author and editor can see this sequence of words, all strung together on a satisfied *mmm*, as a clever and appropriate title, is not coincidental nor is it acceptable: the frisson of wit it produces comes at too high a price.

This volume reprints several updated and revised texts from different points along Bremmer's career trajectory. The following essays included in the volume are nominally concerned with women: "Why Did Early Christianity Attract Upper-Class Women?"; "Pauper or Patroness: the Widow in the Early Christian Church"; "Women in the *Acts of John*"; "Aspects of the *Acts of Peter*: Women, Magic, Place and Date." "Magic, Martyrdom and Women's Liberation in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*"; "*The Acts of Thomas*: Place, Date and Women." The volume also includes five pieces on the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. This naming protocol alone reveals much about the scholarly culture to which the volume belongs: the object of study is either a specific text, or "Christianity." Both are treated as entities with a range of features. On this view, defining and describing those features is the proper task of Patristics.

The article entitled "Why Did Early Christianity Attract Upper-Class Women?" was published in 1989 and still asserts that Harnack is "the fullest exposition of the place of women in the early Church" (33, referring to the 1924 work *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*). By invoking a theological

30. Jan Bremmer, *Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 379. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

totem rather than his colleagues involved in the not-insignificant contemporary move towards doing women's history in the history of Christianity, the article disregards several studies by women which would have been readily available to the author at the time. Even more was available when these essays were revised and updated.<sup>31</sup> Bremmer goes on to posit three reasons why Christianity would have been particularly attractive to upper class women (36–40): opportunities for patronage, proximity to important intellectuals like Justin and Origen and with that an opportunity for rich women “to be heard and to participate in meaningful intellectual discussions” (37), as well as the option to remain unmarried or celibate and practice asceticism (38). Bremmer closes with the following comment:

To sum up, intellectually, socially and sexually early Christianity offered possibilities to upper-class women that were not provided to the same degree by other cults. The courageous deaths of so many female martyrs are eloquent witnesses to the fact that for them Christianity was a religion worth living by and worth dying for. (40)

There are several problems with this approach. Elite late Roman women could already do all of these things without converting to Christianity. The claim that Christianity grew quickly because it was especially equitable or fulfilling to the needs of those who converted is both tendentious and counterfactual. More importantly, both the citation practices in evidence and the manner of reasoning from an image of ancient women as pitiful and exploited until Christianity came along show that this article is not about women. This is not feminist historiography. It is an argument for the superiority of Christianity in comparison to other contemporary religions, including Judaism. It is part of a larger discourse of progress and the effort to get Christianity off the hook: if women converted to Christianity because it provided them with otherwise unavailable benefits, then Christianity is good to women and good for women and can be excused from questioning its own enmeshment with patriarchy.<sup>32</sup>

31. Two major works of which Bremmer might have availed himself at the time are Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1983). Although Bremmer's footnotes appear to have been updated since then, they were updated by other male continental scholars who added in primarily more recent work by still other male continental scholars.

32. For a survey of problems with crediting Christianity for being a net benefit to ancient women, see Elisabeth Castelli, “Gender, Theory, and the Rise of Christianity: A Response to Rodney Stark,”

Bremmer similarly treats Christianity as benevolent towards women in the article "Pauper or Patroness: the Widow in the Early Christian Church," which asks questions like "what role did widows play in the rise of Christianity, how did the increasing institutionalization of the church alter their position, and, last but not least, how did the growing stress on asceticism influence the place of widows in the early church" (43). This time the nominal object of study is not elite women, but widows, and the article turns out to be about how Christianity benefitted them in particular. Again we see an article which is not really about women. It uses women as an argument for the goodness and righteousness of Christianity. Published in 1995, a great deal of critical theory is being ignored in preference for a descriptive survey approach which, methodologically speaking, cannot but reinscribe the agenda of the source texts. A final comment conclusively excludes this piece from consideration as a work of feminist historiography:

Widows of the lower classes, on the other hand, who had not hitherto received any attention or esteem, now became, if they remained unmarried, the object of a flood of praises among the leading intellectuals of the time. Never was the position of the widow so high in the Western world as in this transitional period between antiquity and the Middle Ages. (64)

The issue here is the two-pronged underlying assumption that male praise improves one's social position (strippers, sex-workers, porn stars, and meek housewives, as well as reactionary female advocates of patriarchy, of whom none but the latter are likely to have a very comfortable social position, also receive a great deal of male praise) and that women's (religious) decisions are naturally oriented towards seeking approval from men. Poor widows will have been more interested in material support, most immediately achievable by remarrying or attaching themselves to adult offspring, than "floods of praises" from intellectuals they probably had never heard of and who could not be counted on to provide necessary everyday resources. Aristocratic widows like Melania the Elder had no reason to orient their decisions around any man's opinion, nor is it apparent how Melania's social position would have been improved through

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*Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3 (1998): 227–257. For further reasons to reject the idea that women were particularly attracted to Christianity, see Ross S. Kramer, "Becoming Christian," in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. Sharon James and Sheila Dillon (Chichester, West Sussex and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell: 2012), 524–538, and Judith Lieu, "The 'Attraction of Women' in/to Early Judaism and Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Conversion," *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 72 (1998): 5–22.



praise from an upstart trouble-maker like Jerome of Stridon.<sup>33</sup> It is unclear how her social status could conceivably have been improved at all. If anything, being Christian worsened her social standing because it meant associating with an undesirable figure like Jerome, moving to the provinces and selling off much of her property. The disparity between these points and the state of affairs Bremmer has portrayed indicates how unlikely it is that a pre-critical descriptive approach to the texts can render a feminist historiography. In the end the article proves to be about certain texts' self-congratulatory rhetoric around Christian treatment of widows, which is an importantly different thing than the experience or beliefs of any group of women.

To take a third example, "Women in the Acts of John" claims to deliver "a detailed study of the place of women in the *Acts of John*" (99) and begins a survey of each section of the text, cataloguing where women appear and what they do (100). After ten pages, the conclusion (109) drawn is that:

. . . the treatment of women in *AJ* is rather varied. Whereas upper class women play an active role, old women are only an object of the apostle's actions, and widows are even severely reproached. Clearly, *AJ* reflects in this respect the normal hierarchical views of the Greco-Roman upper classes and, thus, is hardly the product of a community of egalitarian "sisters." Similarly, Burrus' idea of an oral background for some of the stories in *AJ*, notably that about Drusiana, will hardly stand a critical test, since the stories are too poorly informed about Ephesus for such an origin to be credible.

There are several problems at hand here. The remainder of the article is an appendix on the date of the text. This reinforces the view of ancient texts as entities with an array of features which it is the task of the scholar to describe as accurately and thoroughly as possible: texts have a date, a place of origin, a probable readership, and now also a view of women. Slipping "view of women" into this sequence of purported traits of the text is perplexing. More perplexing still is the explicit dismissal of a then-junior female scholar's reading of the text in preference to the views of other older male continental scholars. Whatever sincere interest in women in early Christianity and whatever intention to uplift

33. In both Jerome's case and that of other intellectuals such as Rufinus, it was the male Christian intellectual's status which was greatly improved by attaching themselves to wealthy widows or virgins. See for example the accounts of the patronage activities of such women in Palladius, *Historia lausiaca*, especially Chapters 54–57. Sissel Undheim's study, discussed below, also shows the usefulness to Christian bishops of accumulating extra women, whether virgins or widows, as a sort of deposit of holiness.

women a scholar might foster, neither of these aims can be achieved within traditional continental Patristics because both the scholarly social practices in which the work is embedded and the methodology used are patriarchal to the core.<sup>34</sup>

If I were to publish a series of articles today on any given early Christian text's "attitude toward men," I would not only be metaphorically laughed off stage but would have a very difficult time finding colleagues or funding bodies or publishers or anyone at all willing to work with me after what would be perceived as an obnoxious stunt. One does not see publications on "men in early Christianity" because men, despite millennia of often confounding behavior, are not imagined as a curious and particular demographic which requires special explanation and assessment. Paradoxically, all of our publications are ultimately about men in early Christianity because we do not know what the women were doing or thinking. It only appears sane to write about "women in early Christianity" while drawing on literary texts by men as long as we continue to assume that the story of Christianity is a story about men and for men, so that paying attention to women at all is an extra (and extra-laudable) scholarly act. If we operated instead from the premise that Christianity is a multitude of diverse and often contradictory and incoherent human stories, we would write instead about stories of women, perhaps, but also stories told by women and the gendered imaginations appearing in Christian communities more broadly. We would also be more adept at differentiating "women" from "a male author's fantasy of women." Erasing real women into the fantasy world of a male author is the most insidious epistemic trap laid by patriarchal methodologies. If the fact of the matter is that we only have texts written by men and no access whatsoever to real women, then our object of study as scholars of early Christianity is *not* early Christianity (because we do not have the source materials on that) but "literary texts by elite men in early Christianity."<sup>35</sup>

A more recent study, Sissel Undheim's *Borderline Virginites*, represents a different place in contemporary scholarly topography.<sup>36</sup> The author has clearly

34. Adhering to pre-critical and strictly descriptive methodologies ignores 100 years of thought. As a methodology, it necessarily operates from plausibility within traditional frameworks and therefore requires cooperation with those necessarily patriarchal and colonial frameworks which establish the terms of its legitimacy and value in the first place. For this reason, methodology is ethically significant.

35. See Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the Linguistic Turn," *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 1–31, for discussion of different historical methods' positions on how and to what degree scholars can gain any knowledge at all of past women.

36. Sissel Undheim, *Borderline Virginites: Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2019).

read and understood a significant chunk of critical theory and has integrated notions of construction and deconstruction into her analysis. This allows her to make a more sophisticated analysis of rhetoric around gender and religion and account for the non-homogeneity of Christian communities and thought. Undheim orients her work to uncovering *how* a category like “virginity” is constructed in the late Roman empire, refusing to portion off Christianity from late ancient religion as a whole, thereby avoiding the apparently indestructible fallacy of Christian exceptionalism. She makes the methodologically very craftsmanlike move of examining exactly those examples of virginity which prove problematic within the system: male virgins, widows, and women whose legitimacy as virgins is in question. This proves a good strategy for causing the underlying logic of the construct to reveal itself.

Undheim orients her texts within a larger fourth-century discourse concerned with defining how and why Christian virgins are better and more legitimate than pagan ones. She has explicitly designed her study to question the established narrative of the Christian idealization of virginity as a watershed in the ancient world. In line with recent arguments against Christian exceptionalism, Undheim rejects any stark separation of Christian virgins from Vestal virgins and other non-Christian forms of virginity (2), taking issue with both ancient Christian writers’ and contemporary scholars’ tendency to pretend the Vestals had disappeared entirely and been replaced by Christian virgins (32). Undheim establishes that there is significant continuity between pagan and Christian practices and ideals of virginity, although Christian writers make a lot of noise about how different and superior Christian virgins are.<sup>37</sup> The differences Undheim identifies do not confirm the rhetoric of Christians as inventors or athletes of virginity, but rather as practitioners of a discourse of virginity which involves more abstraction and ambiguity, as well as a tendency to proliferate and generalize, suggesting that really everybody should be a virgin but only a few can manage it (185). In my own view, dousing every single thing in abstraction, paradox, and ambiguity while proliferating and universalizing is just what Christianity in Late Antiquity does, whether Christian writers are referring to virginity, the body in general, sin, salvation, or God.

Due to her methodological approach, Undheim can read against the grain of the sources and access components of Christian discourse on virginity which go beyond valorizing Christian “attitudes toward women” or reinscribing the

37. This is also the position of Jennifer Glancy, *Corporeal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

notion that women were at an advantage if they were Christian and therefore were specially attracted to Christianity. Instead, her examination can focus on the imagined structures of virginity. Significantly, while there is much fuss in the sources about virginity as a departure from female embodiment (for example by treating *virgo* as a different gender than *mulier*, [4]), the rhetoric consistently casts virgins in terms contiguous with other female sexual practices of survival: marriage, wet-nursing, prostitution, child-bearing, or entertainment (46). A construction of virginity as just another form of marriage (12) must call into question whether it had any substantial liberating effect for women: even a virgin is still functionally the property of men, whether Christ, the bishop, her father, or the community whose welfare her renunciation was supposed to guarantee (55). Traditionally, elective virginity only applied to free-born citizen women, because slave women and poor women were exposed to sexual violence. So the idea of choice is not so much a Christian innovation but a socially defined option which had been available to elite women the whole time (40–41). In fact, it is hard to suggest that Christianity provided more freedom to women when even those women who had at one time chosen to live as virgins or considered doing so were subject to punishments if they changed their minds (146). When girls who were raped are required to do penance on the grounds that they should have “protested at length,” while the perpetrator is not excluded from the community but only required to do the same penance, it is not possible to argue in good faith that Christianity was a benefit to women (161–166).

The notion of virginity as a choice is part of Christian efforts to assert the superiority of their virgins over the Vestals. Prudentius for example portrays the Vestals as slackers forced into it and just biding their time until they could get married, whereas Christian women choose virginity freely and permanently (15). Virginity as personal dedication or a free choice or as a benefit to women is hard to argue in the face of bishops like Ambrose hoarding virgins as a sort of deposit of holiness for their own reputations: Ambrose had virgins shipped in from Mauretania, and it was fashionable for aristocratic Christian women to have “an entourage of servile virgins” (44–45).<sup>38</sup> There is further continuity with pagan forms of virginity in surrounding the practice with sacrificial imagery and rhetoric, suggesting that individual girls be sacrificed to a life of virginity

38. It is worth noting here that women, especially elite or privileged women, can also participate in or mimic patriarchal practices. Not everything men do is patriarchal, and not everything women do is feminist.

in order to confer greater status on their families (58–59). Even sexual renunciation and withdrawal from male society did not excuse Christian virgins from the machinations of patriarchy: Christian discourse over-sexualizes them and both Cassian and Augustine portray virgins as especially tempting (106–107). While it is not Undheim’s primary stated purpose to argue against Christian exceptionalism or for virginity as an example of Christianity benefitting women, it is evident how a critically informed methodology reveals discursive structures which cannot possibly excuse Christianity from patriarchy. Instead, even forms of life ostensibly defined by separation from men are shown to be dominated by men and by patriarchal efforts to control, instrumentalize, and dehumanize women for the benefit of men.

This approach to early Christian texts has much more distance from patriarchal uses of the past, but there are still challenges at hand. Critical theory does a lot of feminist work but it is not a feminist miracle pill. The idea that categories are constructed, contested, and political and do not represent reality registered in our field at least 30 years ago. The idea that any given category is ambivalent and self-contradictory is also well-established. A great deal of scholarship on gender in early Christianity in the last 30 years has consisted of touring various sites of the early Christian archive and confirming this to be the case. That is par for the course when new theories and concepts are applied. The question of “*how* is it constructed” is being answered with shimmering particularity, rendering a great deal more insight into the early Christian imaginary than was previously available. But the question of how virginity, marriage, sexuality, motherhood, authority, etc. are constructed is not the last question to ask. It is time for studies of gender in early Christianity to move on towards integrating and expanding upon the various answers to this “*how*” question and do the work of re-modelling entailed by those results. While a critically informed project of discourse analysis like this is much preferable to pre-critical methods of description which necessarily repeat confessional agendas of both ancient and modern authors, it should not be allowed to remain just a much better mode of description. We find out various often surprising and significant things about, in this case, discourses of virginity, but sticking to this method alone does not automatically point us to larger more synthetic questions like why holiness and status are mediated through women’s bodies in the first place. Discourse analysis will get you into position to ask these questions, but it cannot change anything unless the findings are synthesized. It’s not enough to use discourse analysis merely to question, temper, or “trouble” dominant narratives. Feminist historiography means disengaging from such narratives and shifting

one's focus to developing counter-narratives. Working within the premise that women's bodies and behavior are problematic and require assessment and control and definition through high-stakes religious discourse is still acting on the stage set by a patriarchal heritage. The stories we need to tell now have to refuse to treat any fixation on women's bodies and behavior as normal, refuse to focus on centuries of nonsensical fuss.

The same principle applies in research as in our institutions: mere addition of information about discursive structures governing gender and sexuality in early Christianity is analogous to merely hiring more women in otherwise unchanged departments. What is at stake is not just the qualification, correction, or adjustment of the traditional narrative of early Christianity, not even the abandonment of that narrative (an act which has already been completed by a large segment of the field), but a truly feminist historiography of early Christianity which centers the discourse of gender and sexuality not because it is fashionable to do so but because early Christian writers were remarkably preoccupied with using women's bodies, whether physically or discursively, to generate religious capital.

#### WHAT NOW?

I am watching a 1960 interview with James Baldwin from Canadian television.<sup>39</sup> The journalist, a portly, self-satisfied white man, is smoking on screen and addressing Baldwin by his first name. He seems baffled at the idea that there is also something wrong racially in the north. Baldwin is emphatic, clear, bare, focused, but he knows he is not getting anywhere. The interviewer always has his cigarette in his mouth when the camera changes to him. He does not let Baldwin in but carries on to ask whether the lunch counter actions and sit-ins do not constitute progress. He wants points for supporting the protesters. He wants points without even picking up a racket or lacing his sneakers to play the game. Baldwin looks so tired. The interviewer claims optimistically that the old stereotypes are fading away. Baldwin says, "That is incontestable. But what has come in its place is not truer."

It is not enough to temper patriarchal narratives and adjust patriarchal institutions. What comes in its place has to be truer.

We are not doing well at non-patriarchal anti-racist and de-colonized historiography because we are not very good at thinking. It takes whole intellectual

39. <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/author-james-baldwin-on-being-black-in-america> (accessed 10 June 2020).

revolutions for us to figure out that groups are not entities and that categories are not homogenous or strictly separate from each other in reality. It takes decades and decades of philosophy for us to be able to differentiate literary texts from windows onto the past. It is hard for us to see the difference between what we ourselves made and what exists independently of us. We are not the kind of organism that does well at these cognitive tasks. This is a species-specific liability which we should be aware of, just as land mammals know to be wary around deep water. Taking this into account should define the modesty of our efforts to represent the past. It should encourage us to recalibrate how readily we repeat existing accounts of how things were. Our academic ancestors thought they were good at handling categories and texts. We now know we are not. We should think and write accordingly.

Feminist historiography poses questions which patriarchal historiographies cannot answer. Feminist historiography requires grappling with foundations of the discipline, with problems of archives, representation, and textual practices of translation, editing, and other acts of preservation and valorization, including academic study. That grappling must take place with a force proportionate to the absurd profundity of patriarchy. It must be executed on a scale appropriate to a world in which half of the population is routinely ignored and de-valued and excluded as bit-parts in a story where only men can be main characters. It is not radical, it is simply *accurate*, to take very decisive steps toward fully feminist historiography given that patriarchal historiography ignores not just half the population, but is necessarily also colonial and racist and homophobic and ableist and classist historiography, treating the vast majority of the earth's population, past and present, as the scenery through which great men stride.

The act of telling, archiving, collecting, and persistently repeating counter-stories must be the central act of feminist historiography. If the received story is manifestly false, then it is impossible to see what academic merit or intellectual value there could possibly be in continuing to repeat that story. In other words, all historiography must be feminist and anti-racist historiography to have a hope in hell of being accurately human historiography. Counter-storytelling, the final core tenet of CRT, is a key ethical requirement and a key methodology which can change how we use the past and build the sort of world it is worth using the past for.<sup>40</sup> Significant work has been done in this direction, but we are

40. In cultural history, Saidiya Hartman (for example "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 [2008]: 1–14) is currently a leader in this field, along with Emily Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) in theology specifically.

not yet feminist. We have not yet walked so far out of the shot that the camera has to move.

It has been a long time. If I had been one of my Gaulic, Germanic, Celtic, or Slavic ancestors, chances are I would have been captured or sold into slavery to the same Roman Empire whose monks and members I study today. The Celts would have sold me to the Romans for seven gallons of wine.<sup>41</sup> I could grab my jacket and keys and walk into town right now and buy seven gallons of good Italian wine for a fraction of my monthly income. That potential, along with the social structures which cause me to now be writing this essay, means I will probably not be trafficked. But another Slavic woman who cannot spontaneously purchase seven gallons of wine or sit in a library all day being astonished about Celts is being trafficked right now. This is the world in which we write women's history. These are the terms of my own embodiment as a scholar and a woman.

That is what a long time it has been, long enough for the orders of who knows and is known, of whose bodies can be purchased or violated, to have soaked into the soil. Rearrangement of who can be trafficked where and for what, of whose body is sovereign or abject, is one of the chutes through which all that long time has passed. But the buying and selling of bodies and the organizing of bodily hierarchies around exposure to trade and violence remains.

No amount of time and no amount of women writing, thinking, teaching will undo patriarchy. Patriarchy has already poisoned all of the wells. It can only be overturned in our epistemes and imaginaries if *men* also learn new ways of thinking and new visions of the world. Men, scholars, historians, women, must make bold and reckless grabs for other things, for something new, pressing into interstitial spaces and taking terrifying leaps into expanded imagination. That will not lead to peace and justice on earth, but it will keep opening up more and more space for human beings to live and think and breathe. That is the work of humanity and the fostering of learning and heart which I hold to be the sacred center of scholarship.

It has been a long time. The Romans could not imagine that their barbarian Others would one day puzzle over Roman customs, that a Slavic woman would be paid to think and write about Roman religious ways. I am writing to you now from outside what was imaginable in that time. One day some other woman will write from far outside what you can imagine now. ■

41. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (W. W. Norton, 2010), 32–33.