

Forum

Gender History and Global History: Borders and Intersections

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Unsurprisingly in our ever more globalised world, historians are increasingly concerned with geographic borders and their crossing, using different terms to describe their studies of connections, exchanges, intersections, and movements.¹ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann have described their concept of *histoire croisée*, for example, as the history of “empirical intercrossings” and “intersection” in which “objects of research are not merely considered in relation to one another but also *through* one another”.² Matthias Middell speaks of *Transfersgeschichte*, Sanjay Subramanyam and Victor Lieberman of connected histories, Frederick Cooper of shared histories, and dozens of historians of transnational history.

Another body of historical scholarship is also wrestling with issues surrounding the crossing, blurring, and transcendence of borders: that on gender and sexuality. Geographic borders certainly figure in this scholarship, but so do other types of borders, including those relating to gender and sex themselves. As in transnational history, these debates in the history of gender and sexuality have to some degree centered on the double meaning of the perplexing prefix ‘trans’, which can mean both ‘across’ and ‘beyond’. This has happened as increasing numbers of individuals describe themselves,

1 This article builds on my keynote lecture at the Swiss Congress of Historical Studies in Basel in February 2010 and contains material found in my longer article, Crossing Borders in Transnational Gender History, in: *Journal of Global History*, 6, 3 (2011), 357–379. Full references to many examples of the scholarly trends discussed here can be found in the JGH article. I wish to thank the London School of Economics and Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint parts of that article here.

2 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, Beyond Comparison: *histoire croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity, in: *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), 30.

and sometimes the people they study in the past, not as ‘transsexuals’ but as ‘transgender’, that is, not moving across a border from one sex to the other but moving beyond such borders to become neither male nor female, or both male and female. Susan Stryker, one of transgender history’s most influential theorists, has noted ways in which debates about gender and sexual borders have led to consideration of other types of spatial, disciplinary, and temporal borders. In her words, transgender history is history in which “questions of space and movement” are linked “to other critical crossings of categorical territories”, and which “articulates new generational and analytical perspectives”.³

Stryker’s description of transgender history and Werner’s and Zimmermann’s of *histoire croisée* are so similar that they could be reversed: both focus on movements and interconnections across borders of various types, both emphasise multiple perspectives, both discuss socially-constructed and historically-changing ‘imagined communities’, and both draw on the theory and methodology of various disciplines. Despite these parallels, however, to this point there has been relatively little intersection between transnational history – and global or world history more broadly – and the history of gender and sexuality, a situation on which a number of scholars have commented.

I see three primary reasons for this lack of connection. First, global history and the history of gender and sexuality have both developed at the same time as, in part, revisionist interpretations, arguing that the standard story needs to be made broader and much more complex. Each has denaturalised and deconstructed a topic that was a given in historical scholarship: the nation, and especially the Western nation, on the one hand, and heterosexual man, on the other. Thus both have been viewed by those hostile or uninterested as ‘having an agenda’. Both have concentrated on their own lines of revision, so have not paid much attention to what is going on in the other.

A second reason for the lack of intersection is that the primary revisionary paths in global history and the history of gender and sexuality have been in opposite directions. Global and world history has emphasised connections and links, what David Northrup has called the story of the “great *convergence*”.⁴ In contrast, after an initial flurry of ‘sisterhood is global’, gender history over the last decades has spent much more time on *divergence*, making categories of difference ever more complex. Gender historians have emphasised that every key aspect of gender relations is historically, culturally, and class specific. Today historians of masculinity speak of their subject only in plurals, as ‘multiple masculinities’ appear to have emerged everywhere, just as have multiple sexualities in the works by historians of sexuality.

3 Susan Stryker, *Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin*, in: *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 10, 2 (2004), 212–215, 212, 214.

4 David Northrup, *Globalization and the Great Convergence: Rethinking World History in the Long Term*, in: *Journal of World History*, 16, 3 (2005), 249–268.

A third reason is the powerful materialist tradition in world and global history, which stands in sharp contrast to the largely cultural focus of the history of gender and sexuality as these have developed over the last several decades. Most global history has focused on political and economic processes carried out by governments and commercial elites. Women's history also initially had a strong materialist wing, with many studies of labour systems and political movements, but since the linguistic/cultural turn of the 1980s, more attention has been paid to representation, meaning, and discourse, which has also characterised the history of sexuality.

Despite this lack of intersection in the past, however, this border is beginning to be crossed. Exciting scholarship that draws on *both* global history and the history of gender and sexuality is beginning to appear, which points toward a more border-crossing future. I see such work emerging especially in six areas: movements for women's rights; diverse understandings of sexuality and gender; colonialism and imperialism; intermarriage; national identity and citizenship; and migration.

First: Movements for women's rights. The history of the 'first wave' of the feminist movement that began in the nineteenth century initially focused on the United States and Great Britain, but more recent scholarship has made clear that this movement was global, not simply something emanating from the Anglo-American world. The 'woman question', which, along with suffrage, debated the merits of women's greater access to education, property rights, more equitable marriage and divorce laws, temperance, and protection for women workers, was an international issue, though with different emphases in different parts of the world. Women's rights were linked to other social and political issues in both colonies and metropolises, and to calls to broader democratic representation for all, not simply for women. Efforts to achieve women's rights and the actions of actual women have often been forgotten, or intentionally effaced, in the nationalist historiographies of anti-colonial struggles, however. Studies are beginning to revise this picture and examine the interplay between women's rights movements and state-building, sometimes setting this in a comparative or global context.

Women's suffrage was not always a force for more general notions of rights, however, but was also linked to racialised constructions of nation and empire. In many places, advocates of women's rights used ideas about racial and class superiority to bolster their arguments, noting how much more worthy and responsible honourable white middle-class women were than working-class, immigrant, or non-white men. Women understood to be 'honourable' were married and generally mothers, of course, so such lines of reasoning were also heterosexist, although sexuality was never mentioned openly, in contrast to blatant and hostile race and class comparisons.

The second-wave feminist movement that began in the 1960s and 1970s was similarly international, and comparative studies are evaluating similarities and differences between feminisms in West and East, North and South. Some of these works are global, while others are regional, but still examine what happens when ideas, institutions, and individuals cross borders.

Second: Diverse understandings of sexual relations and gender identities. Here scholarship has particularly focused on individuals now generally described as 'third genders'. Some of these individuals are intersexed, and occasionally they are eunuchs, but more commonly they are morphologically male or female but understood to be something else. The best known of these are found among several Native American peoples, and the Europeans who first encountered them regarded them as homosexuals and called them 'berdaches', from an Arabic word for male prostitute. Now most scholars choose to use the term 'two-spirit people', and note that though Europeans focused on their sexuality, they are often distinguished from others by their work or religious roles, as well as their sexual activities. Two-spirit people often had special religious and ceremonial roles because they were regarded as having both a male and female spirit rather than the one spirit which most people had; they could thus mediate between the male and female world and the divine and human world. The difference was thus one of gender rather than sexuality.

Studies of two-spirit people in the Americas have been accompanied by studies of third genders in other areas of the world: the *bissu* of South Sulawesi, who carried out rituals thought to enhance and preserve the power and fertility of the rulers; the *hijra* of northern India who perform blessings at marriages and the births of male children; the *khanith* in Oman and the *mabus* in Polynesia, who were morphologically male but performed women's work. These studies of third genders are not simply broadening historical scholarship, but are also proving politically useful, as people within the gay rights and transgender movements today use them to demonstrate the variety in indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality and to stress that demands for rights for homosexuals are not simply a Western import.

Third: Gender and sexuality in colonialism and imperialism. Both men and women were agents in imperial projects, and colonial powers shaped cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity. Many recent works demonstrate that imperial power is explicitly and implicitly linked with sexuality, and that images of colonial peoples were gendered and sexualised. Research on gender and sexuality in the context of imperialism has emphasised links between colonised areas and the metropole, arguing that the process of colonisation shaped gender ideologies and practices everywhere.

Among colonised areas, South Asia has seen the most research. Feminist historians of India have developed insightful analyses of the construction of gender and national identity in India during the colonial era, and the continued, often horrific and violent, repercussions of these constructions today. They highlight the role of female figures – the expected devoted mother, sometimes conceptualised as Mother India, but also the loving and sacrificing wife – in nationalist iconography. Though the theoretical framework in this scholarship is post-colonial, these scholars also take much of post-colonial scholarship to task for viewing actual women largely as a type of 'eternal feminine', victimised and abject, an essentialism that denies women agency and turns gender into a historical constant, not a dynamic category.

Fourth: Intermarriage and other types of sexual relationships among individuals from different groups. These occurred especially in colonies or border regions increasingly known as 'gender frontiers', and were interwoven with developing notions of racial difference and national identity. Marriage created an economic unit as well as a sexual relationship, and historians have begun to examine the economic consequences of intermarriage and other encounters involving men and women from different groups in frontier and border areas. Intermarriage facilitated and was a key part of a pattern of cultural exchange in which men who were new in an area tended to adopt local customs far more than their indigenous wives adopted those of their husbands.

'Gender frontiers' were not only found in the colonies, however. In post-Reformation Europe, authorities debated whether people should be allowed to marry across denominational lines within Christianity, or whether such mixing of Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic blood was dangerous. Similarly, Dagmar Herzog comments about contemporary Europe: "The entire complex of issues surrounding European identities and citizenships, with all the accompanying assumptions about appropriate inclusions and exclusions, now rests with remarkable frequency on sex-related concerns."⁵

Fifth: Gendered national identity and citizenship. Although a key aim of transnational and global history has been to get away from a focus on nations, one of its ironic conclusions is just how transnational nationalism has been (and continues to be). An edited collection, "Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century", has been particularly influential in setting out key themes, with essays noting the ways in which national symbols, rituals and myths are gendered, and tracing both women's contribution to nation building and their exclusion from it by the state and its institutions.⁶ Other studies have followed, exploring the ways in which gender shaped citizenship as a claims-making activity, and stressing the role of war in defining citizenship for women and men. As would be expected, most monographs on gender and nationalism focus on one country, but those that examine former colonial areas tend to put their subjects to some degree within a global perspective or have adopted comparative methodology.

Sexuality, as well as gender, has shaped the making of nations, especially in the twentieth century. Studies have examined the ways in which the United States and other nations have excluded homosexuals from full citizenship through restrictions on immigration, military service, and access to public welfare, and viewed heterosexuality as essential to a secure nation. In Europe, debates about the immigration and citizenship of Muslims often revolve around gendered practices such as the veil, and include discussion of Muslim attitudes toward homosexuality.

5 Dagmar Herzog, *Syncopated Sex: Transforming European Sexual Cultures*, in: *American Historical Review*, 114, 5 (2009), 1287–1308, 1305.

6 Cf. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann and Catherine Hall eds., *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Oxford 2000.

Sixth: Gender and sexuality in migration. Nations are built through policies of inclusion and exclusion, and entered and exited through migration, a topic that has been a central theme in world history. Approximately half of all long-distance migrants today are female, with women's migration patterns sometimes similar to those of men but sometimes quite different. Recent studies examine the 'transnational' character of migrants' lives, in which women and men physically move back and forth and culturally and socially create and maintain links across borders. They also discuss ways in which gendered and sexualised migration shaped (and continue to shape) the economies, societies, and polities through and across which people moved.

Research on sexuality and migration has emphasised that just as the state produced national identities, so it also produced (and continues to produce) sexual and gender identities, often at its borders when it lets in, or does not let in, individuals that it identifies as a certain type. To those policing geographic borders, 'homosexual' was not simply a discursive category, but an actual, and threatening, type of person. Many countries refuse to allow in those judged to be homosexual, to say nothing of those who challenge the 'natural' gender order of male and female to present themselves as transsexual. Despite such restrictions, however, those whose sexual and/or gender identity and presentation were in some way 'queer' have migrated extensively, so much so that scholars have been able to trace 'queer diasporas' in many parts of the world. They examine ways in which people in different places challenged, adapted, appropriated, and reworked the conceptualisation of sexual acts or identities, what is often termed 'localisation'.

Taken together, all of this research suggests ways in which the subject matter, theory, and methodology within global history and the history of gender and sexuality can intersect, and indeed are intersecting. First there is the emphasis on movement, interconnection, and interaction. Global history in all its forms is a study of relationships, interactions, and intertwinings. These interconnections also shaped the experiences of people who did not move a metre, for any fixed location can also be saturated with global and transnational relationships. Sexual behaviour, in its most common forms, is, of course, just these things: physical, emotional, mental, and other interactions and intertwinings. Thus the two reinforce one another. The editors of the new journal "Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism" explicitly note that they seek to cross many kinds of borders – political, cultural, sexual, disciplinary – and take their theory from both transnational and gender scholarship. The journal's 2000 mission statement reads: "Recognizing that feminism, race, transnationalism and women of colour are contested terms, *Meridians* engages the complexity of these debates in a dialogue across ethnic and national boundaries, as well as across traditional disciplinary boundaries in the academy."⁷

“Meridians” mission statement points to a second common quality, an emphasis on multiple perspectives and crossing disciplinary boundaries. As I noted at the beginning, both Stryker and Werner/Zimmermann highlight the interdisciplinarity and multivocality of their different trans enterprises. Much new scholarship has been published in collections of essays, which similarly point with pride at the disciplinary diversity of the authors, as well as their diversity along other lines of difference.

Third, though both global history and the history of gender and sexuality have created binaries – elite/subaltern, colony/metropole, homosexual/heterosexual, masculine/feminine – they have also called for their destabilisation. Both early studies in world history and early women’s and gay and lesbian history often involved a grand narrative of domination and resistance, in which the subordinate subject was either a victim or resistor (or both). This dichotomous grand narrative has now been thoroughly critiqued, as the studies reviewed here demonstrate. Increasingly all categories are complicated, and the emphasis instead is on what in gender scholarship is usually termed ‘intersectionality’, in queer and trans history ‘post-identitarian subjectivity’ and in transnational and global scholarship in phrases such as ‘active and dynamic principle of intersection’. All dichotomies are too limiting, runs this line of thought, particularly in a globalised world in which individuals can blend and build on elements from many cultures to create hybridised or fluid sexual and national identities, or no identity at all.

There is thus much to look forward to as future scholarship draws on the theoretical richness of both these areas of study, but I also want to add a final, more cautionary note. Individuals might very well understand themselves to be beyond a national identity, or beyond a binarised notion of sexual identity, or even beyond gender. It is important to recognise, however, that national identities are not simply discursive categories, but very real, and gender and sexual identities are as well. Just as it produces national identities, the state continues to produce sexual and gender identities, often at its borders when it lets in or does not let in individuals that it identifies as a certain type, thus barring them from full participation in a new globalised world. States engage in, to use Gayatri Spivak’s phrase, “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest”.⁸ Thus as we examine historical examples of border-crossers and border-transcenders, and often find in them much to celebrate, or as we cross disciplinary, theoretical, or physical borders ourselves, it is equally important to remind ourselves of the continued power of those borders.

8 Gayatri Spivak, *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, in: Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean eds., *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, London 1995, 214.

