Thinking Sex in the Transnational Turn: An Introduction

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AS AN UNDERGRADUATE, MY INITIAL EXPOSURE to what was then called gay history was a volume titled *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. It was published in 1989, the year I started college, an early anthology in a field that was also just then emerging. I read not only about the United States, but also about pederasty in ancient Greece, lesbians in medieval Europe and early-twentieth-century Paris, homosexuality in late imperial China, male love in early modern Japan, English boarding school friendships, Russia’s gay culture during the revolution, and sexuality between men in the South African mines. As I look back on the anthology now, especially in light of the current preoccupation with internationalizing historical practice, the volume certainly seems ahead of its time. Yet in contrast to the way historians now think about their craft, neither the editors nor the contributors expressed skepticism about the nation-state as a unit of scholarly study. It seems more likely that the internationalism of the project emerged out of debates that raged in the 1980s between essentialist and social-constructionist points of view. Was there a homosexual who existed across time and cultures? Answering that question—affirmatively or, as most historians eventually did, negatively—meant looking beyond any particular national or cultural frame. I suspect as well that the editors of a volume in a new and marginal field found something empowering in discovering scholars

In her capacity as program co-chair of the 2007 Annual Meeting of the AHA, Barbara Welke encouraged the original roundtable from which this forum emerged, and helped me to think through many of the issues it raised. Thanks to *AHR* Associate Editor Sarah Knott for her support and stewardship of this forum. For comments on this essay, I am grateful to Jennifer Guglielmo, Joanne Meyerowitz, Barbara Welke, and two anonymous reviewers. My title is a reference to Gayle Rubin’s now-classic essay—often seen as having helped to launch sexuality studies in the academy. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, 1984), 267–319.

1 Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York, 1989). The field might still be called “gay history,” but more likely “queer history” or “LGBT history” or the broader “history of sexuality” (of which queer topics form only a portion).

working on similar questions in different geographic fields. Hence the impulse to bring them together in a common project.

While this early and important anthology was not explicitly (or even implicitly) transnational, its global reach nonetheless suggests some of the reasons why transnational approaches are now beginning to flourish in the history of sexuality more generally. Indeed, as different subfields make the transnational turn with varying degrees of ease, historians of sexuality seem especially well positioned. The history of sexuality is still a relatively new field, less encumbered than some by the obstacles that especially large historiographies pose for cross-cultural work.³ Moreover, although the situation has improved markedly in the past two decades, historians of sexuality continue to be at least somewhat marginalized by the broader discipline, and therefore more open to new approaches, and awake as well to all the political reasons for seeking the broadest possible coalition of like-minded scholars. In this regard, they might resemble an earlier generation of African American historians who, as Robin Kelley demonstrated, positioned their work in a transnational frame.⁴ Like these predecessors, historians of sexuality simply have less of the establishment to shake off, and more reason to challenge the existing categories of analysis.⁵

Yet it is the temporal relationship between the development of the history of sexuality and transnational history as modes of inquiry that is perhaps most striking. Writing in 1980, Raymond Grew observed that historians of women (and social historians more generally) were avid comparativists.⁶ Comparative history and women’s history came into their own more or less simultaneously, and this may be one reason why so many women’s historians were interested in comparative work. At the time, Grew saw the embrace of an innovative comparative method as part of the work of building a new subfield.⁷ A similar if more recent historiographic tale might be told about the relationship between the history of sexuality and transnational history. In 1989, the year Hidden from History was published, Akira Iriye called on historians (in the pages of this journal) “to search for historical themes and conceptions that are meaningful across national boundaries.”⁸ Historians of sexuality acquired their own journal in the early 1990s, just as some of the discipline’s flagship journals began to publish their first forums on transnational history (the AHR in 1991 and the Journal of American History in 1992).⁹ The “take-off” periods for the history of sexuality

⁵ Related to this claim is Tyrrell’s notion that the professionalization of the discipline in general suppressed an earlier wave of transnational scholarship. Ibid., 1015–1044.
⁷ “Comparative analysis of historical cases is especially valuable in building new sets of questions into a field of study,” Grew wrote, “and in connecting these questions to the established literature.” He also wondered if comparative work would decline as subfields became more established. Ibid.
⁹ “AHR Forum,” American Historical Review 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1031–1072; and “Toward the
and transnational history coincide exactly. From the 1990s to the present day, these two major poles of intellectual energy have in a sense developed in tandem.10

Shaped perhaps by this timing, some early transnational histories made sexuality into an “integrative device” of the micropolitics of international encounter. This was especially obvious in work on the “intimacies” of empire pioneered by scholars such as Ann Stoler, Antoinette Burton, and Anne McClintock, or in Kathleen Brown’s articulation of a “gender frontier” in which ideas about masculinity, femininity, and sexual behavior shaped the experience of contact.11 Also from early on, some historians of sexuality (especially gay historians) sought to understand global patterns of regulation, subculture formation, and identity or desire.12 The imbrication of these fields has been helped along, as Joanne Meyerowitz points out in her contribution to this forum, by the fact that interconnection is a central analytic in both fields. Other “keywords” for transnational history—such as “exchange,” “encounter,” “movement,” and “circulation”—are also constructs with which historians of sexuality are deeply at home. In addition, “sexuality”—like “transnational”—is an umbrella term that can bring together work across fields on social (intimate, experiential), cultural (representational), economic (structural), and political phenomena. Yet the potential vitality of the contribution that historians of sexuality might make to the endeavor of transnational history has not been widely recognized or fully explored. One aim of this forum, then, is to flag the ways in which the history of sexuality enhances the transnational approach, reveals its limitations, and suggests its benefits. The other aim is to investigate more deliberately the potential for transnational scholarship by historians of sexuality, even as we also carefully assess the challenges ahead.

What follows is meant to lay more groundwork. It began as a roundtable at the 2007 meeting of the American Historical Association in Atlanta, Georgia, when six historians of sexuality who study distinct areas of the world convened to discuss the state of work on sexuality in their respective fields. This published forum is a con-
tinuation of that conversation. It does not claim complete coverage: a list of the fields omitted would be as long as the fields represented here. Nor does it attempt to resolve the question of whether historians should prioritize strictly transnational, global, or comparative approaches to the past.\textsuperscript{13} It instead demonstrates that the newish field of the history of sexuality spans the globe; it recognizes the pull that many feel to internationalize their work, and the related imperative that in order to do so, historians must deepen their knowledge of other geographic fields.\textsuperscript{14} All of the participants were asked what they thought historians working in other geographic areas should know about the history of sexuality in their own field of expertise. How had the field developed, and what were the key questions, either adequately answered or still untouched? This is, in other words, an exercise in expansive historiography that is intended to facilitate translocal and transnational work. In addition, the following essays raise broader questions about how subfields develop within a discipline organized by geographic field. How does the fact that one is an Africanist, a Europeanist, or an Americanist, for example, influence the way that one approaches sexuality in the past? Because sexuality here might stand in for any number of subfields—say, labor or religious or legal history—the articles in this forum speak to a broader AHR audience on this point. They also invite discussion on the related question of how particular subfields use the transnational turn to rethink the past.

Within these general parameters, the essays that follow range across the premodern, precocolonal era to the contemporary era. Marc Epprecht offers an assessment of the major work on sexuality in African history, as well as the difficulty posed for such scholarship by pervasive and simplistic narratives of “African sexuality.” Joanne Meyerowitz focuses her attention on several important clusters of research on sexuality by historians of colonial America and the United States, and also considers the potential for transnational work on sexuality. Dagmar Herzog compares the histories of sexuality within twentieth-century European nation-states (a reminder of the “transnational within” regions).\textsuperscript{15} Tamara Loos evaluates the state of the field in Asian history, also with useful attention to intraregional transnational exchanges, as well as to local systems of gender and sexuality. Although many of the historians have bravely gone beyond the chronological parameters of their own expertise, the essays do tilt toward the modern period. Yet Leslie Peirce emphasizes the premodern Middle East, in part because there is less work on sexuality in that region for the modern period. And Pete Sigal’s methodologically focused essay examines precocolonal artisans in what is now Peru and priests in what is now central Mexico. Both Peirce and Sigal remind us of what can be gained by including pre-


\textsuperscript{15} The “transnational within” is taken from Herzog’s original conference paper.
modern (and hence pre-nation-state) societies within our transnational vision. All of the essays provide readers with extensive bibliographical information for further exploration.

When the articles are read together, what emerges most clearly beyond an exciting set of common themes—colonialism, violence, reproduction, identity, disease, and regulation, among others—is the challenge and complexity of our transnational agenda. The most profound issue we face is perhaps one of translation. As Loos points out, this is a literal issue: language poses one of the most significant barriers to our ability to know sexuality in the past or to move back and forth between linguistically diverse societies. While language specialization is necessary for research, Peirce continues, it is also “insularizing”—it has contributed, for example, to the neglect of the Middle East in comparative and transnational studies. Yet the problem of translation is never just about language alone. So Sigal asks us to consider, for example, what counts as sexuality in the past. How is the historical record distorted when we read our very modern notions back into premodern societies? When we take Western constructs east? The impact of Foucault on historians of sexuality around the world is evident here, but so are the uneven results of his travels. His ideas may circulate transnationally (and even spur research), yet they were developed in Europe, with greatest applicability to Western societies. Finally, the fields represented here all vary in their openness to and collaboration with other disciplines (especially anthropology and literature), and as a result move on different theoretical tracks. Ethnographic approaches have been much utilized by Africanists, for example; textual analysis reigns in Middle Eastern studies; area studies shapes the historiography of Asia. Empirical work was once key among U.S. historians of sexuality, but cultural history approaches have also been on the rise. These are differences not just of method but of meaning. Sexuality is not necessarily a common language between us and the past or among us as individual historians.

A related concern is the way that modernist biases can complicate transnational work on sexuality. Both sexuality and the nation-state are, in fact, modern constructs, and some advocates of transnational history argue that transnational work can and should be done only in the temporal context of actual nation-states—defined as the “period since the so-called age of democratic revolutions,” according to Ian Tyrrell. But historians of sexuality have more invested in this project than simply deconstructing or contextualizing the nation-state, and have already profited greatly from premodern/modern comparisons. Another risk of removing societies that preexisted nation-states from consideration (which particularly haunts sexuality studies) is that the East may come to stand in for the premodern. In order to complicate simplistic connotations of modern/West and premodern/East, all four terms must be

16 This is one reason why Chris Bayly describes “transnational” as a restrictive term. “Before 1850, large parts of the globe were not dominated by nations so much as by empires, city-states, diasporas”;
“AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” 1442. According to Ian Tyrrell, historians affiliated with la Pietra (an enormous collaborative project sponsored by the Organization of American Historians to internationalize American history) rejected “trans-cultural” as overly broad and overly vague. “The transnational history concept enabled scholars to recognize the importance of the nation,” Tyrrell writes, “while at the same time contextualizing its growth.” Tyrrell, “What Is Transnational History?”

kept in play. One common narrative that begs to be complicated is the idea of a modern Western gay identity imposed on non-Western societies where a supposedly premodern gender is the salient erotic category. But note how gender is also a central erotic/identity category in George Chauncey’s study of early-twentieth-century New York, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis’s study of mid-twentieth-century Buffalo, Regina Kunzel’s examination of modern American prison culture, and Joanne Meyerowitz’s exploration of transsexuality in twentieth-century America, to take only a few examples from the modern United States. Whether or not this gender paradigm circulates transnationally (and our arrows should be pointed east to west rather than the reverse), the idea of a modern sexual identity based on sexual object choice may yet turn out to be less historically salient across the globe than our current frameworks might suggest. Work by historians of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (among others) may help American and European historians interrogate this issue in their own societies.

Cross-cultural work, as this last example illustrates, is often seen as a corrective, something that will potentially give us a richer and more accurate account of the past. But what if the result of bringing our disparate historiographies into conversation is that the silences and distortions in each separate field are, in fact, exacerbated? Many of the essays make clear the paucity of work on women’s desire, and especially lesbian history. Given the state of this scholarship within any given field, won’t work across geographic fields simply magnify the omission? Similarly, several of the following essays note disparities within fields about which regions are studied. So there is a dearth of work on Eastern Europe. Most work on Africa comes from the southern part of the continent. We know considerably more about the history of sexuality in, say, New York City than we do about sexuality in either the U.S. South or the Midwest. When historians looking for transnational projects look to Europe, Africa, or the United States, will they not head toward regions where the historiography is already sure and well-developed? (Does the “American case” then become sexuality in New York City? Does the “African case” become sexuality in South Africa?) Relatedly, would a Europeanist looking at same-sex desire across national borders, for example, be more likely to choose as a subject of study an Asian context (where age- or gender-differentiated unions between men were long normative and the literature is substantial) or an African one (where homosexuality was long constructed as “not African,” and the literature is thinner)? And how will what Peirce calls the...

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20 Leila Rupp’s examination of women’s relationships within the international women’s movement stands out as a unique attempt to write a transnational lesbian history. See Rupp, “Sexuality and Politics in the Early Twentieth Century: The Case of the International Women’s Movement,” Feminist Studies 23 (Fall 1997): 577–605.
21 Historians of sexuality are beginning, however, to pay more attention to the American South. See, for example, Susan Cahn, Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Pippa Holloway, Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920–1945 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); and John Howard, Men Like That: A Southern Queer History (Chicago, 1999).
“sensibilities” of the region shape the selection of cases? Resources will not necessarily flow toward the subjects that most need or deserve the attention, and transnational histories may themselves divert our attention from the study of local sexual regimes. Moreover, we cannot understand the writing of our various histories apart from the postcolonial map upon which we are all positioned, a map on which the material inputs for the writing of history are not evenly distributed.

Such are the perils, but they are not insurmountable, and the payoffs are also easily discernible. As transnational studies engage ever larger scales of analysis and sometimes reach for synthesis—a trend that some scholars celebrate and others worry about—attention to sexuality might help ensure that the best insights of social and cultural history are not lost along the way. Historians of sexuality have as much to gain by embracing transnationalism, in common enterprise with each other and the discipline as a whole. But even historians of sexuality who do not take up transnational questions in their own research will find the work of those who do extremely useful in the classroom. Simply put, as historians of sexuality, we probably have to labor as hard as anyone in the academy to denaturalize our concepts for students. Transnational histories of sexuality are a critical tool in this endeavor—not because the insight that various societies and cultures organize sexual life differently is such a new one, but because the transnational impulse integrates and proliferates studies that demonstrate this fact in the curricula, putting them much more readily at our fingertips.

If this kind of scholarship were easy, of course, there would already be less talking and more doing. Despite the way that sexuality has already been implicated in transnational history, a fully transnational history of sexuality still remains to be written, and it is, in many ways, a daunting project. As I have listened in on conversations about transnational history over the past few years, however, I have been encouraged by the way some refer to it not as a subject but as a method or a way of seeing (a direction followed by some of the contributors to this forum). Boiled down, that method seems to consist of at least two major propositions. First, historians should cultivate a certain flexibility about following important questions wherever they go. Sometimes questions will not exceed national boundaries—there may be, for example, such a thing as a national sexual culture, as Herzog points out. And sometimes important transnational questions will not be about movement at all, as in Mary Herzog’s discussion of Middle Eastern societies.

22 Note on this point, for example, Leslie Peirce’s observation in her contribution to this forum that historians miss the “homegrown critique” that existed alongside the European critique of sexual immorality in Middle Eastern societies.

23 Many feminist historians have raised a related concern that world history (with its emphasis on convergence and universals) re-marginalizes women’s history (with its emphasis on divergence and particularity). See, for example, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality,” Journal of World History 18 (March 2007): 53–67. On the synthetic and universalizing tendencies of transnational history, Akira Iriye lauded scholars who could translate their “respective specialized and fragmented knowledge into more universal language and explore the meaning of . . . feudalism, slavery, or modernization in different countries.” Iriye, “The Internationalization of History,” 3. Michael McGerr had a more skeptical view. Transnational history, he wrote, “may challenge the array of newer fields gathered under the broad rubric of ‘social history.’” McGerr, “The Price of the ‘New Transnational History,’” American Historical Review 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1065.

24 Is being a “transnationalist” like being a feminist? Does it imply, in other words, not only an enduring political commitment of some kind but categories of analysis that change the way one views one’s research? For most feminist historians, to push the analogy, gender analysis was not a commitment that attached to certain kinds of projects, but a prioritized way of seeing every historical problem.
Renda’s trenchant observation that any fixed location may be itself saturated with transnational relationships. Second, historians should nurture relationships across geographical fields, talk through historiographical and cultural difference, and learn from the difficulties (as well as the ease) of communication. As we move toward a more deliberate discussion of historiography, concepts, categories, and circulations, it may be helpful as well to think about how far historians of sexuality have already come from an earlier, less self-conscious interest in international variety, and that a subfield that was once “hidden from history” may yet provide a model for imagining a past across and in spite of national borders.

This was a remark that Renda made from the audience at the roundtable discussion “Excavating Transnationalisms: A Model for Feminist Collaboration” at the Berkshire Conference in Minneapolis, June 14, 2008.