

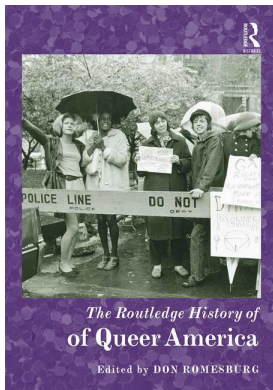
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge History of Queer America

Don Romesburg

Centering Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Queer History (1800s–1890s)

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315747347-4>

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Published online on: 28 Mar 2018

How to cite :- Clare Sears. 28 Mar 2018, *Centering Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Queer History (1800s–1890s)* from: *The Routledge History of Queer America* Routledge

Accessed on: 19 Jan 2022

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315747347-4>

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3

CENTERING SLAVERY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY QUEER HISTORY (1800s–1890s)

Clare Sears

Introduction

Over the past few decades, scholars have produced a wealth of research on nineteenth-century queer history. This scholarship has shone a spotlight on industrial northern cities and the western frontier, detailing conditions that facilitated both the proliferation and restriction of non-normative genders and sexualities. By emphasizing the transformative effects of industrialization and westward expansion, however, the field of queer history has generally overlooked the sexual dynamics of slavery, an institution whose persistence, abolition, and aftermath was central to nineteenth-century life. Recent scholarship by Omise'eke Tinsley, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, and Vincent Woodard demonstrates that this omission is unjustified. Queer historical studies of slavery are not only academically viable but also politically necessary to foreground the specificities of black queer histories and center slavery's constitutive role in modern sexualities. In this chapter, I review the field of nineteenth-century queer history by discussing its central exclusion (slavery) in relation to its dominant themes (industrialization and western expansion). In doing so, I consider how the field would productively shift if queer histories of slavery were centered.

Slavery, Ships, and Plantations¹

Queer history's neglect of slavery is startling, given the institution's centrality to economic and political life in the nineteenth century. Slavery's roots in the Americas, of course, stretch back to a much earlier period, when Spanish explorers first brought kidnapped Africans to Santo Domingo in 1501 and English colonists transported enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Fortified rather than undermined by the Declaration of Independence, slavery expanded rapidly in the early nineteenth century, after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 enabled large-scale production of a highly profitable export crop. In 1808, US Congress banned the international slave trade, but allowed the domestic trade to grow, which tripled the slave population by 1860, when four million African Americans lived in captivity. Ultimately, political

disagreements over the economics of slavery, states' rights, and the federal government's authority to prohibit slavery in western territories prompted the Civil War in 1861. Following the war's end in 1865, Congress ratified the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, which signaled slavery's legal end.

To date, scholars have presented scant primary evidence of volitional same-sex intimacies between African Americans held captive during slavery. Nonetheless, as Omise'eke Tinsley argues, histories of enslaved peoples must be open to different evidentiary possibilities. Tinsley, for example, traces the etymology of the Suriname word *mati*, which Creole women use to describe their female lovers. The word translates as "my girl," but has its roots in shipmate, as in "she who survived the Middle Passage with me."² Colonial records point to similar shipmate intimacies in multiple Caribbean sites, between African women—and men—who were kidnapped and transported to the "New World" together. Tinsley argues that enslaved women and men, aboard ships and on plantations, formed erotic same-sex bonds, some likely sexual, some not. Regardless of their sexual content, Tinsley frames these relationships as queer, as they radically disrupted a violent social order that denied the sentience of African peoples.

In *A Desired Past*, Leila Rupp presents additional fragmentary evidence of same-sex intimacies between enslaved women during the nineteenth century. Specifically, Rupp recounts the legal case of a white woman who sought monetary compensation after a person she enslaved, named Minty, escaped to British troops during the War of 1812. A witness in the case testified that Minty had used two surnames: she adopted the first (Gurry) when she married her husband and the second (Caden) when she left her husband and entered "an intimacy with a negro woman." As Rupp explains, this evidence points to the existence of same-sex relationships among enslaved women as well as their acknowledgement by whites.³

Although evidence of consensual same-sex relationships on US plantations remains fragmentary, a remarkable first-hand account of Cuban slavery paints a richer picture. Esteban Montejo was born into slavery in 1860 and a full century later narrated his memories for publication as *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Montejo described life on a plantation where men far outnumbered women. In this context, some men opted for celibacy while "others had sex with each other and didn't want anything to do with women. Sodomy, that was their life." According to Montejo, these sexual practices were not temporary aberrations, but embedded in long-term relationships, with clear gender roles, where one man would cook and clean for his "husband."⁴ In "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic," Charles Nero analyzes Montejo's writings to establish the existence of same-sex intimacies between enslaved men in the Americas. Certainly, different conditions may have facilitated or inhibited same-sex intimacies on US plantations and these await their own excavations. Nonetheless, as Tinsley argues, black queer scholarship can usefully transgress national boundaries to foreground the oceanic crossings and traumatic dislocations that shaped slavery's trajectories.

The forced transportation and confinements of slavery were matched by coerced sexual encounters on ships and plantations. As historians have documented, sexual assault was endemic in these sites, as white men and women subjected enslaved peoples to multiple violations, including rape, concubinage, and forced reproduction. In this context, it is unsurprising that same-sex sexual abuse occurred. For example, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861, presented a harrowing account of the multiple sexual assaults she witnessed before escaping from slavery. Some of these involved white masters and enslaved black men. In one passage, Jacobs describes a white master's sexual assault of a man named Luke. According to Jacobs, the unnamed master had become "prey to the vices growing out of the 'patriarchal institution'" and suffered from "extreme dissipation," a nineteenth-century sickness believed to result from sodomy. The man required constant care and kept Luke naked and chained

to his bed, where he subjected him to “freaks . . . of a nature too filthy to be repeated.” Contemporary scholars interpret this passage in different ways. In *Against the Closet*, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman argues that Jacobs strategically deployed Luke’s violation to subvert dominant ideologies of black perversity and highlight white men’s degeneracy. More critically, in *The Delectable Negro*, Vincent Woodard claims that Jacobs’ narrative promoted a politics of racial uplift that marginalized sexually ambiguous men such as Luke. Regardless of the interpretation, Jacobs’ account provides clear evidence that at least some white men raped the black men they enslaved during the nineteenth century.⁵

Jacobs also describes her own experience of same-sex sexual torment at the hands of a white woman, Mrs. Flint, the plantation master’s wife. The ordeal began when Mrs. Flint brought Jacobs to sleep near her bedroom, ostensibly to protect her from rape by the master. However, Flint soon began her own sexual invasions, visiting Jacobs during the night, leaning over her sleeping body, and whispering sexual propositions in her ear, “as though it were her husband who was speaking to me.”⁶ Jacobs explains Flint’s actions in terms of jealousy, but according to Woodard, this obscures the white woman’s own erotic interests in Jacobs, including her desire for sexual access and domination. After all, white women entered complex power-laden relationships with enslaved women, and multiple opportunities for coercive sex existed. It should come as no surprise then (although it often does) that other enslaved women described sexual assault by white mistresses, including the African American abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth.

Alongside consensual and coerced same-sex intimacies, slavery instituted gender arrangements among captive peoples that diverged significantly from dominant white norms. This could take several forms. In her influential essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers makes the compelling case that slavery had “ungendering effects.” Specifically, for those held captive, slavery substituted hard physical labor for the domestic sphere, erasing a terrain that was foundational to white bourgeois fictions of men and women’s “separate spheres.” Moreover, by transferring ownership of enslaved children from parents to masters, slavery obliterated the kinship ties and reproductive meanings that nineteenth-century gender norms typically required. Ultimately, slavery transformed humans into commodities to be traded, bought, and sold. Under such logic, although consistently resisted, African peoples ceased to be subjects of gender and became objects of property. For Spillers, slavery’s ungendering effects unleashed “amazing . . . pansexual potential,” not as a source of fluid identifications and multiple pleasures, but as “an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire,” through which white men, white women, or both could commit sexual assault.⁷

Dominant white ideologies also expelled enslaved peoples from normative gender through depictions of masculine black women and feminine black men. As Woodard documents, white audiences frequently accused Sojourner Truth of being a man in women’s clothes. At one event in Indiana, Truth bared her breasts to white women backstage to authenticate her gender, although not before lambasting the crowd for their possessive sexual demands of black women’s bodies. Similarly, white men often imagined black men to be servile maternal figures who nursed them when sick and placed older black men, in particular, into grandmotherly roles. According to Woodard, these cross-gender representations extended to “the race” as a whole, as whites positioned “Negros” as a feminine race unable to resist European-American domination, while claiming masculine superiority for themselves.⁸

Gender variance was not just an unwanted imposition, however; some black men identified with and took pleasure in their femininity during slavery, just as some black women lived and embraced their masculinity. Woodard, for example, reframes the gender ambiguity of Jacobs’ character Luke, from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, arguing that he is not the epitome

of degradation due to his coerced sexual and domestic service, but “a different type of representative black man who . . . offers a nonconforming and complicated understanding of black male sensibility.” Woodard also foregrounds moments of pleasurable gender crossings in Frederick Douglass’s writings, including his performance of femininity in relation to “gallant” and “chivalrous” white men who supported abolition.⁹

Nineteenth-century sources further document the female masculinity of Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery and became active in the underground railroad, shepherding more than three hundred people to freedom in the north. Some black women wore men’s clothing as disguise when fleeing captivity, but Barbara McCaskill argues that Tubman’s masculinity was more pervasive and enduring. Remembered as the “Moses of her people,” Tubman demonstrated physical strength and valor that often outstripped male peers. Fellow abolitionist John Brown exclusively used male pronouns when praising the colleague he named “General Tubman”: “He [Harriet] was the most of a man naturally that I ever met with.”¹⁰ Certainly, Brown’s language may have reflected his failure to imagine strength and courage as female characteristics and it risked replicating racist narratives that denied black women’s femininity. Still, such descriptions may have reflected Tubman’s identification with masculinity and appreciation for such prose.

Acknowledging sexual and gender variance during slavery not only enriches understandings of the antebellum period, but also sheds new light onto the sexual politics of emancipation. After the Civil War, African American citizenship developed in complex relationship to sexual propriety and gender normativity, as Roderick Ferguson documents. The federal government played a central role in this, creating the Bureau for the Relief of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands in 1865. Tasked with managing the newly enfranchised black population, the Freedmen’s Bureau (as it was popularly known) promoted institutions that linked economic and moral development, including marriage. Queer histories of slavery provide important context for these developments.

According to Katherine Franke, the Freedmen’s Bureau used state marriage laws to regulate African Americans’ sexual practices and foster normative citizenship. Incorporation into the state institution of marriage narrowed the field of acceptable intimacies and delegitimized a wide-range of relationships that had flourished in enslaved communities. According to Brenda Stevenson, these included opposite-sex “sweethearting” (short-term non-monogamy), “taking up” (long-term non-monogamy), and “abroad marriages” (marrying but living apart from a spouse from another plantation). Stevenson does not discuss the queer possibilities of these relationships, but Mattie Udora Richardson suggests that abroad marriages may have facilitated same-sex relationships, allowing people to have infrequent contact with a distant spouse, while maintaining regular intimate contact with a same-sex partner. Post-emancipation marriage laws disrupted these queer arrangements and funneled black sexualities into opposite-sex monogamy. African Americans who did not comply with state marriage laws risked prosecution for sexual offenses; if convicted, they faced jail time and forced labor under the convict lease system. As a result, state marriage laws did more than disavow queerness and discipline black sexualities. They also supported the new system of racial subjugation that arose in slavery’s wake.

Evidence for queer histories of slavery in the nineteenth century is readily accessible, both through well-known primary sources, such as slave narratives, and through less conventional means, such as etymology. Utilizing this evidence, recent scholarship documents a wide range of same-sex intimacies and gender diversity during slavery, including long-term relationships on Cuban plantations; erotic intimacies aboard slave ships; same-sex interracial rape on US plantations; whites’ imposition of masculinity onto black women and femininity onto black men; and some enslaved peoples’ embrace of cross-gender identifications.

Remarkably, the field of queer history tends to neglect this evidence and overlook slavery as a site of sexual and gender variance. Instead, the field—as often taught in college classrooms and synthesized in written reviews—centers the industrial northeast and western frontier as preeminent queer sites.¹¹

Industrialization and Northeastern Cities¹²

Queer histories of the nineteenth century frequently focus on the northeastern United States, positioning the region's industrial capitalist cities as the cradle of recognizable queer life. These studies build upon John D'Emilio's pathbreaking 1983 essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity," which asserted the centrality of an industrial capitalist economy to the formation of modern gay identity. D'Emilio acknowledged that his analysis led with white experience and was thus limited. He also recognized that the northern industrial labor market excluded the vast majority of African Americans who remained tied to southern agriculture well into the twentieth century.¹³ By replicating this framework, however, scholars tend to presume slavery's marginality to queer history and push African Americans to the periphery, unless or until they migrated from the south to the north.

Certainly, industrialization brought massive changes to economic, social and sexual life in the northeast. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the US economy was based in agriculture, with production and consumption taking place on southern slave plantations and on northeastern and frontier family farmsteads. As the century unfolded, new developments in technology and transportation brought an industrial revolution, encouraged by federal legislation that supported big business and capitalist accumulation. Historians debate slavery's role in these developments, but generally agree that slave labor produced profitable export crops, particularly cotton, that financed industrialization.

The shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one produced new working conditions and inequalities, drawing ever more people into a capitalist system that generated great prosperity for the nascent corporate elite and immense deprivation for the rapidly expanding working-class. Eventually, these changes consumed the nation, but they first took root in northeastern cities, only later extending to the war-torn south and western frontier. As a result, industrialization engendered geographic transformations, alongside economic ones, as rural Americans and European immigrants moved to northeastern cities in search of work. Very few African Americans made this journey before slavery ended; in 1860, for example, only 10 percent of African Americans were free and only a minority of those lived in the north. In the decades following Reconstruction's end (1870s to 1890s), African Americans did leave the south in greater numbers, fleeing a new system of racial subjugation marked by endemic poverty, Jim Crow segregation, criminalization, and lynching. Nonetheless, even by the turn of the twentieth century, most African Americans lived in the south and were largely untouched by the economic and social changes occurring in the north and west.

For people who did live in the urban northeast, the rise of an industrial economy transformed social and sexual life in several ways. First, as D'Emilio emphasized, industrialization facilitated key changes in the family by increasing opportunities for mobility and decreasing the economic necessity of reproduction. In the northeastern agricultural economy, production and consumption had previously taken place within the family, making it extremely difficult to live outside of this unit. By extension, sexuality was generally tied to reproduction, as families produced multiple offspring to ensure their farmstead's current and future productivity. The shift to an industrial economy disrupted the necessity of reproduction, as children became an economic liability rather than a benefit. Additionally, the rise of industrial cities gave people the freedom to live

outside of traditional family units and move to large urban areas where sexual possibilities decoupled from reproduction or family sanction became more viable.

Rapid industrialization and urbanization, for example, facilitated the development of street subcultures conducive to sex between men. In *City of Eros*, Timothy Gilfoyle documents the world of commercial sex that flourished in mid-nineteenth century New York. Although Gilfoyle focuses on female prostitution, he includes evidence that male prostitutes worked in city brothels too. Urban life also facilitated cross-class sexual encounters, as upper and middle-class men cruised city streets for “rough trade.” Walt Whitman, for example, is best known for his homoerotic poetry, but his writings also describe multiple late-night encounters with working-class boys in the streets, bars, and bathhouses of New York City and Washington D.C., just south of the Mason–Dixon line. Gender variance characterized these street scenes, as effeminate fairies plied their trade alongside masculine hustlers, and some city prostitutes identified as female, even as the law labeled them male. In 1836, for example, New York City police arrested an African–American woman named Mary Jones for pickpocketing a john, only to identify her as a man who lived in a local brothel. Similar to Jones, many sexual and gender dissidents fell afoul of the law and spent time in prison. They encountered a prison culture that facilitated sex among inmates, typically structured by gender variance or age difference, as Regina Kunzel and Mack Friedman document.

By the late nineteenth century in most northeastern cities, commercial entertainment districts augmented street-based subcultures, housing bars and clubs that offered sexual and gender transgressive pleasures. Urban vice investigations provide ample evidence of these venues, but first-hand reports also exist. Most notably, Ralph Werther (aka Jennie June and Earl Lind) documented New York City’s commercial sexual underground, describing his identification as an androgyne (a feminine man who desires sex with men), visits to a “sex resort” named Paresis Hall, and involvement with the Cercle Hermaphroditos, an organization that fought against persecution. Most sources focus on the practices of whites, but one report on Washington D.C. in the 1890s spotlights African American men who donned women’s clothing, attended drag parties, ogled naked men, and took part in “an orgie of lascivious debauchery beyond pen power of description.” As Beth Clement and Beans Velocci explain in the subsequent chapter, such reports informed sexologists’ theories of “inversion” that explained same-sex desire in terms of cross-gender identification.¹⁴

Finally, the northeastern industrial economy facilitated another form of same-sex intimacy with general social acceptance: romantic friendships. These relationships had roots in the late eighteenth century, as Rachel Cleves documents in the previous chapter. They gained new ground in the nineteenth century as industrialization produced novel gender arrangements among the predominantly white middle-class. Emerging from capitalist relations of production, the middle-class was marked by a specific gendered division of labor that placed men and women into radically different economic roles. Certainly, white men and women performed different productive tasks in the colonial agricultural economy, but these were typically interrelated and took place within the shared space of the home. In an industrial economy, the separation of men and women’s labor was spatialized and expanded, as middle-class men left the home to enter the public sphere of paid employment and political life, while middle-class women were confined to the private sphere. The ideology of separate spheres legitimized this division, contrasting white men’s strong, competitive and rational character with white women’s weak and submissive nature. Unsurprisingly, there was a sexual dimension to this ideology, which granted men exclusive claim to lust and passion and denied women access to sexual desire.

Ironically, the ideology of separate spheres supported “romantic friendships” among middle-class women. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg first documented these relationships in her influential

article “The Female World of Love and Ritual.” As Rosenberg and subsequent scholars describe, romantic friendships were characterized by intense emotional attachment and physical affection between two women, which included kissing, caressing, bed-sharing, and declarations of enduring love. Women often imagined their romantic friend to be their lifelong soul mate, even as they entered conventional marriages with men. Most studies of romantic friendships have focused on women, but Jonathan Katz and Leila Rupp also describe romantic friendships among men, the most famous being Abraham Lincoln, who formed a long-term relationship with Joshua Speed. Similar to women’s relationships, men’s romantic friendships were socially accepted, but they were expected to end when men got older and married.

As Cleves explains, historians disagree on the sexual nature of romantic friendships, with early accounts insisting on emotionally intense but non-sexual dynamics and more recent work claiming that participants knew of their relationship’s sexual potential, as did society at large. Feminist scholars also discuss the relationship of women’s romantic friendships to first-wave feminism. Adrienne Rich, for example, situates romantic friendships on a “lesbian continuum” that she defines through intimate bonding rather than sex. As part of this continuum, romantic friendships always resisted heteropatriarchal power and carried feminist potential. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman focuses on change over continuity, arguing that society tolerated romantic friendships for most of the nineteenth century because they posed little threat to patriarchal power. This changed at the century’s end, however, as first-wave feminism brought new educational and professional opportunities to middle-class women, raising the specter of economic independence and sexual autonomy. Most analyses of romantic friendships center on the experiences of middle-class whites who were the primary subjects of separate spheres ideology. However, Farah Jasmine Griffin and Karen Hansen document the romantic friendship of two freeborn African American women who lived in the north in the 1860s: Rebecca Primus, a schoolteacher from a prominent Connecticut family, and Addie Brown, a domestic worker from Connecticut and New York City.¹⁵

From prostitution to romantic friendship, studies of the urban northeast provide compelling documentation of same-sex intimacy and gender nonconformity during the nineteenth century. Foregrounding the effects of industrialization, these studies connect large-scale economic developments with transformations in sexual life. Problems arise for the field of queer history, however, when individual studies are folded into an origin story that centers industrialization as the sole facilitator of modern sexual identities and overlooks the predominantly agrarian slave economy in the south. In part, the problem consists of a narrow regional focus that easily morphs into racial neglect: African Americans sometimes appear in these studies, but only when engaging in relationships and subcultures already marked as white. Conceptual problems also arise, as queer histories of northeastern cities foreground social processes and dynamics that are stunningly inapplicable to studies of slavery, including free labor, geographic mobility, a declining reproductive imperative, and the rise of separate spheres ideology. Slavery, of course, was defined by the absence of freedom, both in terms of labor and movement. It also erased the gender divisions of labor that underlay separate spheres ideology, hijacked enslaved women’s reproductive capacities for plantation profits, and denied sexual autonomy. To better appreciate the regional and racial specificity of scholarship on northeastern cities, we need to consider its relationship to queer histories of slavery, as well as to work on the west.

Western Frontiers

Over the past two decades, nineteenth-century queer history has increasingly supplemented its emphasis on northeastern cities with a focus on western expansion. Expansion was of

paramount importance during this period, stretching the nation's borders to the Pacific Ocean and triggering monumental changes in sexual and gender possibilities. To varying degrees, queer historical scholarship documents these changes, addressing their disparate effects on whites, Chinese Americans, Latino/as, and Native peoples. This scholarship, however, continues to bypass the sexual and gender dynamics of slavery even as "the peculiar institution" spread into vast new western territories.

Western expansion was propelled by the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the economics of land ownership. Proponents of Manifest Destiny believed that the United States had a divine right to possess and rule the northern continent from the Atlantic to Pacific coast, imposing their dominion on peoples who already occupied the land. For some adherents, manifest destiny was a religious edict that would bring Christianity to "heathen" Natives. For others, economic motives dominated, as new land promised new wealth and opportunity, particularly after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Manifest destiny ideology fueled genocidal federal policies toward sovereign Indian nations, driving thousands of people from their ancestral homelands and effecting massive loss of life and land. Manifest destiny also legitimized the Mexican-American War, which transferred a full half of Mexico's territory to the United States in 1848. Finally, manifest destiny facilitated a massive westward migration of European immigrants and white Americans who settled in the hotly contested and newly conquered territories of the frontier.

As the nation's borders moved westward, possibilities for same-sex intimacies and gender diversity fundamentally altered. For European immigrants and white Americans, westward migration could lead to new possibilities and pleasures in frontier towns. In large part, these opportunities were structured by a profound gender imbalance among white migrants, as men were far more likely to head west than women. This opened up multiple spaces for cross-gender practices and same-sex intimacies, such as those that occurred at men-only dances in gold rush camps. In *Roaring Camp*, for example, Susan Johnson describes dances in the Calaveras County mines, where men attached large canvas patches to their pants to indicate their availability as a "lady" dance partner for the evening. At other dances, men would wear women's clothing, shoes and wigs to effect a more convincing transformation, as I document in my book *Arresting Dress*. By the end of the century, these dance practices were distant memory, but new entertainment venues emerged that encouraged same-sex erotics and gender-crossings. For example, at least two bars (Bottle Meyer's and The Dash) in San Francisco's vice district employed female impersonators who plied patrons with alcohol and had sex with men for money on the premises.

Westward expansion also facilitated multiple forms of gender crossing among migrants who wore men's clothing on bodies the law deemed female. Some of these people identified as women but dressed as men to facilitate a safer journey, while others fully identified as men. In one of the first studies of queer California history, the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project recounted the story of Charley Parkhurst, who identified and lived as a man for thirty years in the mid-nineteenth century, until a coroner classified his body as female after his death. My book also documents cross-dressing practices among female sex workers who wore men's clothes to advertise their availability for commercial sex. Other women brought cross-dressing and prostitution together in different ways, by wearing men's clothing, hanging out in brothels, and forming intimate relationships with those who worked there. These clothing practices did not exist in a legal vacuum and during the second half of the nineteenth century, many towns and cities, particularly in the West, passed laws against cross-dressing.

While thousands of white Americans headed west for gold rush camps and frontier towns, Chinese migrants traveled east to these territories, typically migrating from Guangdong Province on China's southern coast to the port of San Francisco. Many traveled inland, but others settled

in San Francisco where a distinct Chinese neighborhood took root, shaped by legal discrimination, residential segregation, community development, and merchant initiatives. Here, a series of homosocial living arrangements emerged that Nayan Shah describes as “queer domesticities” in *Contagious Divides*. These arrangements were not necessarily characterized by erotic activity between men, although this surely sometimes occurred. Instead, they were characterized by same-sex intimacies and gender expressions that diverged from dominant norms. In lodging houses and opium dens, for example, Chinese men enjoyed physical proximity to one another and forged emotional ties that counteracted the loneliness of living overseas in a hostile land. Additionally, in white households, Chinese men worked as houseboys and nursemaids, providing domestic services that inverted masculine norms. The concentration of Chinese men in domestic work stemmed from a racially stratified labor market, but many white observers interpreted it as evidence of Chinese inferiority and white American dominance.

When white and Chinese migrants came to the US southwest, they settled in highly contested borderland territory. Seized from Mexico in 1848, these borderlands were home to thousands of Mexicans who lost significant power, wealth, and status over the following decades. Historians have examined race, class and gender dynamics across these socio-geographic spaces, but as Emma Perez and Maria Elena Martinez argue, in-depth queer histories of the post-conquest borderlands have yet to be written, hampered by inadequate sources. Victor Manuel Macias-Gonzalez’s work on northern Mexico’s borderland cities provides one exception, documenting a proliferation of homosocial spaces that facilitated sex between men in the late nineteenth century, including bars, gymnasiums, bathhouses and jails. Several studies of borderland towns in the United States also present evidence of gender variance among the region’s Latino/a populations.

Susan Johnson, for example, uses gold rush diaries to document multiple cross-gender practices among Mexican and Chilean miners who lived in California’s southern mines during the 1850s. These include a matador named Señorita Ramona Perez, who revealed herself to be a man in women’s clothing during a bullfight in Tuolumne County and an unnamed “Chilean hermaphrodite” who caught the attention of a white man named Alfred Doten. Peter Boag also presents evidence of cross-gender practices in *Redressing America’s Frontier Past*, including those of a Mexican woman named Mrs. Nash. Nash worked as a laundress for General Custer’s Seventh Cavalry at Fort Lincoln in Dakota and she married several times. Upon her death in 1878, a medical examiner announced that Nash had a male body and following significant teasing from fellow soldiers, her husband of five years committed suicide shortly after.

Representations of Mexican cross-dressing also appeared frequently in mid-nineteenth century literature. In *American Sensations*, Shelley Streeby analyzes popular sensationalist fiction of the 1840s and 1850s that regularly featured cross-dressing Mexican women soldiers. Authors typically represented these characters as elite, light-skinned women who donned men’s clothing to defend their country, fell in love with a US soldier, and subsequently returned to a traditional female role. As Streeby explains, these popular stories usually featured weak and effeminate Mexican men, narrating a gendered crisis in Mexican nationality that legitimized US military incursions. Boag also analyzes representations of Mexican cross-dressing, focusing on male bandits who wore women’s clothing in the post-war years. According to Boag, these representations delegitimized resistance to US domination by framing Mexican bandits as unmanly and deceitful men.

Mexicans, of course, were not the largest group of people who inhabited the southwest before white and Chinese migrants arrived, and for Native peoples who already occupied these lands, western expansion radically constricted the possibilities for same-sex intimacies and cross-gender pleasures. Most notably, many Native tribes recognized a third or fourth gender category

beyond the man/woman binary familiar to white Americans. Different tribes used different terms to describe these genders—*boté* among the Crow, for example, *winkte* among the Lakota, *nadleeh* among the Navajo. Unwilling to accept non-binary genders, white settlers condemned Native peoples for instituting social and sexual practices that seemed at odds with their sex, including “cross-dressing” appearance and “same-sex” sodomy. From the early days of conquest, European explorers used Native gender and sexual difference to legitimize genocide. Throughout the nineteenth century, the US government pursued the extermination of Native peoples via war and forced migration across deadly terrain.

At the same time, the government launched interventions aimed at cultural extermination via assimilation and education. These explicitly targeted Native gender differences and related sexual possibilities. Some of these interventions took place on reservations. From the 1830s onward, the federal government systematically forced many Native peoples to leave their ancestral lands and move within the strict spatial boundaries of a reservation. Although Native tribes maintained sovereign status on reservations, confinement greatly constrained their capacity for self-determination and survival, particularly when boundaries were redrawn and territory reduced in violation of treaty agreements. The federal government established agencies on reservations, under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which became mechanisms for eradicating gender and sexual difference. Evidence of these efforts dates back to the 1870s, when one agent forced a third-gender *miati* of the Hidatsas nation to endure a haircut and change of clothing in simulation of white masculinity. Later in the century, government agents on Crow land pressured *botés* to wear men’s clothes and adopt a social and sexual role that mirrored that of white men, punishing those who refused to conform. One turn-of-the-century anthropologist reported that government agents particularly focused on a highly respected *boté* named *Osh-Tisch*, and “repeatedly tried to make him put on masculine clothing, but the other Crow protested, saying it was against his nature.”¹⁶

Recognizing that Native reservation communities could undermine US efforts at cultural genocide, beginning in the 1870s government officials created Indian boarding schools to “civilize” Native youth away from home. Attendance was mandatory and over 100,000 Native children were sent to live in these schools and learn the ways of white Christian culture. For children who did not identify as “boy” or “girl,” boarding school life could be especially devastating. Many children were forced to abandon their gender, while others ran away and sought sanctuary on reservations. Some youth remained in school and tried to avoid detection, risking harsh punishments if discovered. Historian Walter Williams, for example, describes a Navajo *nadleeh* child at the famous Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania who successfully lived in the girls’ dormitory until a lice infestation forced all students to disrobe in front of school officials. Interpreting the child’s body as male, officials removed the student from the premises. Receiving no information from government or school officials, the student’s family endured horrific uncertainty and never discovered whether their child had been transferred to another institution, incarcerated, or killed.

Similar to studies of northeastern cities, many queer histories of western expansion emphasize freedom and mobility as constitutive of sexual and gender possibility. Some of these histories, however, complicate the field’s reliance on mobility as a foundational concept. Williams’ work on Native peoples, for example, emphasizes the traumatic loss of mobility that western expansion engendered, with confinement on reservations restricting sexual and gender diversity and furthering physical and cultural genocide. Additionally, Shah’s research on San Francisco’s Chinese community shows how confinement in a racially segregated labor and housing market facilitated sexual and gender practices that can be conceptualized as queer. These studies enrich the conceptual apparatus of nineteenth century queer history and broaden the field’s regional

and racial focus. Despite these important developments, however, the field continues to overlook the south and to neglect slavery as a queer historical site. To disrupt this troubling trajectory, queer histories of slavery must be centered, facilitating critical and constructive dialogue with established research on the west and north.

Throughout this chapter, I have reviewed the omissions and inclusions of nineteenth century queer history, documenting the viability and vitality of queer histories of slavery. One task for the field as a whole, however, is not simply to add slavery but to ask how knowledge, methods, and narratives of the queer nineteenth century would shift if slavery were centered. For example, how might understandings of women's same-sex eroticism differ if the paradigmatic example was not romantic friendships born of separate spheres, but *mati* relationships born of slavery or eroticized violence between mistress and enslaved? Similarly, how might understandings of sexuality in male-only environments shift if we began with the sex-segregated holds of slave ships, in the early nineteenth century, rather than the sex-segregated dances of gold rush towns, fifty years later? Finally, how might understandings of non-normative gender differ if we traced sexology's theories of inversion back to slavery's ungendering dynamics, as Abdur-Rahman suggests, rather than to gender variant subcultures in northeastern cities? Certainly, these shifts would center captivity and violence as constitutive of sexual possibility, displacing the field's almost exclusive focus on mobility and volition in this century. Additionally, they would push queer history to grapple more extensively with the interplay of racism and eroticism, as Sharon Holland urges. Undoubtedly, the resulting historical narratives would offer less celebratory and romantic accounts of the queer past. These accounts, however, would also be less partial and distorted, and ultimately more reflective of queer life—and death—in the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 For another discussion of enslavement as it relates to queer US history of the nation, see also Eithne Luibhéid, "Queer and Nation," in this volume.
- 2 Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ* 14, no. 2–3 (2008): 192.
- 3 Leila Rupp, *A Desired Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42.
- 4 Esteban Montejo, *The Biography of a Runaway Slave*, ed. Miguel Barnet, translated by W. Nick Hill (Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1994), 40.
- 5 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1861]), 192. According to Woodard (*The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within the U.S. Slave Culture*, New York: New York University Press, 2014), Frederick Douglass also made multiple allusions to male rape when writing of his experiences under slavery.
- 6 Jacobs, *Incidents*, 34.
- 7 Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 77.
- 8 For more on racialized representations of sexual and gender deviance, see, in this volume, Sharon Ullman, "Performance and Popular Culture."
- 9 Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 130–131.
- 10 Letter from John Brown. Quoted in Jean Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 295.
- 11 See the Queering Slavery Working Group tumblr, organized by Vanessa Holden and Jessica Marie Johnson, for further discussion. <http://qswg.tumblr.com>. Accessed November 14, 2016.
- 12 For the longer history of urbanization in queer history, see, in this volume, Kwame Holmes, "The End of Queer Urban History?"
- 13 For an extended discussion of queer labor history, see, in this volume, Sara Smith-Silverman, "Labor."
- 14 Ralph Werther—Jennie June, *The Female Impersonators* (New York: The Medico-Legal Journal, 1922), 146–152; Charles H. Hughes, "Postscript to Paper on Erotopathia: An Organization of Colored Erotopaths," *Alienist and Neurologist* 14, no. 4 (1893): 731–32.

- 15 For further discussion of respectability strategies by people of color in queer US history, see Nayan Shah's chapter in this volume, "Queer of Color Estrangement and Belonging."
- 16 Robert Lowie, *The Crow Indians* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1935), 48, quoted in Walter Williams, *Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 179.

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