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Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction xiii

I. Contesting Grounds

1. Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"
   JUDITH BUTLER 3

2. “Experience”
   JOAN W. SCOTT 22

3. Feminism and George Sand: Lettres á Marcie
   NAOMI SCHOR 41

4. French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics
   GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK 54

5. Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others:
   The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape
   DONNA HARAWAY 86

6. Postmodern Automatons
   REY CHOW 101

II. Signifying Identity

7. A Short History of Some Preoccupations
   DENISE RILEY 121

8. Dealing with Differences
   CHRISTINA CROSBY 130
   MAE GWENDOLYN HENDERSON 144

10. The Real Miss Beauchamp: Gender and the Subject of Imitation
    RUTH LEYS 167

11. Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity
    B. HONG 215

III. Subjects Before the Law

12. The Abortion Question and the Death of Man
    MARY POOVEY 239

13. “Shahbano”
    ZAKIA PATHAK AND RAJESWARI SUNDER RAJAN 257

14. Gender, Sex, and Equivalent Rights
    DRUCILLA L. CORNELL 280

15. Women “Before” the Law: Judicial Stories about Women, Work, and Sex Segregation on the Job
    VICKI SCHULTZ 297

IV. Critical Practices

    KIRSTIE McCLURE 341

17. Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics
    CHANTAL MOUFFE 369

18. Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention
    SHARON MARCUS 385

19. Gender, Power, and Historical Memory: Discourses of Serrano Resistance
    ANA MARÍA ALONSO 404

20. A Pedagogy for Postcolonial Feminists
    ZAKIA PATHAK 426

V. Postmodern Post-Script

21. The End of Innocence
    JANE FLAX 445

22. Feminism and Postmodernism
    LINDA SINGER 464

Index 476

Notes on Contributors 482
of millions of gay men, and that history had actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex. (174)

The sense of political possibility is frightening and exhilarating for Delany. He emphasizes not the discovery of an identity, but a sense of participation in a movement; indeed it is the extent (as well as the existence) of these sexual practices that matters most in his account. Numbers—massed bodies—constitute a movement and this, even if subterranean, belies enforced silences about the range and diversity of human sexual practices. Making the movement visible breaks the silence about it, challenges prevailing notions, and opens new possibilities for everyone. Delany imagines, even from the vantage point of 1988, a future utopian moment of genuine sexual revolution (“once the AIDS crisis is brought under control”).

That revolution will come precisely because of the infiltration of clear and articulate language into the marginal areas of human sexual exploration, such as this book from time to time describes . . . . Now that a significant range of people have begun to get a clearer idea of what has been possible among the varieties of human pleasure in the recent past, heterosexuals and homosexuals, females and males will insist on exploring them even further. . . . (175)

By writing about the bathhouse Delany seeks not, he says, to “romanticize that time into some cornucopia of sexual plenty,” but rather to break an “absolutely sanctioned public silence” on questions of sexual practice, to reveal something that existed but that had been suppressed. The point of Delany’s description, indeed of his entire book, is to document the existence of those institutions in all their variety and multiplicity, to write about and thus to render historical what has hitherto been hidden from history.

A metaphor of visibility as literal transparency is crucial to his project. The blue lights illuminate a scene he has participated in before (in darkened trucks parked along the docks under the West Side Highway, in men’s rooms in subway stations), but understood only in a fragmented way. “No one ever got to see its whole” (174). He attributes the impact of the bathhouse scene to its visibility: “You could see what was going on throughout the dorm” (173). Seeing enables him to comprehend the relationship between his personal activities and politics. “[T]he first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies.” Recounting that moment also allows him to explain the aim of his book: to provide a “clear, accurate, and extensive picture of extant public sexual institutions” so that others may learn about and explore them. Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In
this conceptualization of it, the visible is privileged; writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.

This kind of communication has long been the mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past. It has produced a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others and has drawn attention to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional histories. It has also occasioned a crisis for orthodox history, by multiplying not only stories, but subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed irreconcilable—perspectives or standpoints, no one of which is complete or completely "true." Like Delany's memoir, these histories have provided evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds, whether these constructions vaunt the political superiority of white men, the coherence and unity of selves, the naturalness of heterosexual monogamy, or the inevitability of scientific progress and economic development. The challenge to normative history has been described, in terms of conventional historical understandings of evidence, as an enlargement of the picture, a corrective to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision, and it has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as of the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her texts.

Documenting the experience of others in this way has been at once a highly successful and limiting strategy for historians of difference. It has been successful because it remains so comfortably within the disciplinary framework of history, working according to rules which permit calling old narratives into question when new evidence is discovered. The status of evidence is, of course, ambiguous for historians. On the one hand, they acknowledge that "evidence only counts as evidence and is only recognized as such in relation to a potential narrative, so that the narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative." On the other hand, their rhetorical treatment of evidence and their use of it to falsify prevailing interpretations, depends on a referential notion of evidence which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real.

When the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience," the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an original point of explanation—as a foundation upon which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction, and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it. When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.

To put it another way, the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems—those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and, in the case of histories of gender, those that rest on notions of a natural or established opposition between sexual practices and social conventions, and between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Histories that document the "hidden" world of homosexuality, for example, show the impact of silence and repression on the lives of those affected by it and bring to light the history of their suppression and exploitation. But the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, its notions of subjects, origin, and cause.

The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms. We come to appreciate the consequences of the closeting of homosexuals and we understand repression as an interested act of power or domination; alternative behaviors and institutions also become available to us. What we don't have is a way of placing those alternatives within the framework of (historically contingent) dominant patterns of sexuality and the ideology that supports them. We know they exist, but not how they've been constructed; we know their existence offers a critique of normative practices, but not the extent of the critique. Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as constituted relationally. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It
is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces. This kind of historicizing represents a reply to the many contemporary historians who have argued that an unproblematized “experience” is the foundation of their practice; it is a historicizing that implies critical scrutiny of all explanatory categories usually taken for granted, including the category of “experience.”

The Authority of Experience

History has been largely a foundationalist discourse. By this I mean that its explanations seem to be unthinkable if they do not take for granted some primary premises, categories, or presumptions. These foundations (however varied, whatever they are at a particular moment) are unquestioned and unproblematic; they are considered permanent and transcendent. As such they create a common ground for historians and their objects of study in the past and so authorize and legitimize analysis; indeed analysis seems not to be able to proceed without them. In the minds of some foundationalists, in fact, nihilism, anarchy, and moral confusion are the sure alternatives to these givens, which have the status (if not the philosophical definition) of eternal truths.

Historians have had recourse to many kinds of foundations, some more obviously empiricist than others. What is most striking these days is the determined embrace, the strident defense, of some reified, transcendent category of explanation by historians who have used insights drawn from the sociology of knowledge, structural linguistics, feminist theory, or cultural anthropology to develop sharp critiques of empiricism. This turn to foundations even by antifoundationalists appears, in Fredric Jameson’s characterization, as “some extreme form of the return of the repressed.”

“Experience” is one of the foundations that have been reintroduced into historical writing in the wake of the critique of empiricism; unlike “brute fact” or “simple reality,” its connotations are more varied and elusive. It has recently emerged as a critical term in debates among historians about the limits of interpretation and especially about the uses and limits of post-structuralist theory for history.

The evocation of “experience” by historians committed to the interpretation of language, meaning, and culture appears to solve a problem of explanation for professed antiempiricists even as it reinstates a foundational ground. For this reason it is interesting to examine the uses of “experience” by historians. Such an examination allows us to ask whether history can exist without foundations and what it might look like if it did.

In Keywords Raymond Williams sketches the alternative senses in which the term “experience” has been employed in the Anglo-American tradition. These he summarizes as “(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from reason or knowledge” (126). Until the early eighteenth century, he says, experience and experiment were closely connected terms, designating how knowledge was arrived at through testing and observation (here the visual metaphor is important). In the eighteenth century, experience still contained within it this notion of consideration or reflection on observed events, of lessons gained from the past, but it also referred to a particular kind of consciousness. This consciousness, in the twentieth century, has come to mean a “full, active awareness” including feeling as well as thought. The notion of experience as subjective witness, writes Williams, “is offered not only as truth, but as the most authentic kind of truth,” as “the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis” (128). According to Williams, experience has acquired another connotation in the twentieth century different from these notions of subjective testimony as immediate, true, and authentic. In this usage it refers to influences external to individuals—social conditions, institutions, forms of belief or perception—“real” things outside them that they react to, and does not include their thought or consideration.

In the various usages described by Williams, “experience,” whether conceived as internal or external, subjective or objective, establishes the prior existence of individuals. When it is defined as internal, it is an expression of an individual’s being or consciousness, when external, it is the material upon which consciousness then acts. Talking about experience in these ways leads us to take the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced. It operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, or homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals.

Teresa de Lauretis’s redefinition of experience exposes the workings of this ideology:

Experience [she writes] is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in oneself) those relations—material, economic,
and interpersonal—which are in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical.\textsuperscript{12}

The process that de Lauretis describes operates crucially through differentiation; its effect is to constitute subjects as fixed and autonomous, and who are considered reliable sources of a knowledge that comes from access to the real by means of their experience.\textsuperscript{13} When talking about historians and other students of the human sciences, it is important to note that this subject is both the object of inquiry—the person one studies in the present or the past—and the investigator him- or herself—the historian who produces knowledge of the past based on “experience” in the archives or the anthropologist who produces knowledge of other cultures based on “experience” as a participant observer.

The concepts of experience described by Williams preclude inquiry into processes of subject construction; and they avoid examining the relationships between discourse, cognition, and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge. Questions are not raised about, for example, whether it matters for the history they write that historians are men, women, white, black, straight, or gay; instead “the authority of the ‘subject of knowledge’ [is established] by the elimination of everything concerning the speaker.”\textsuperscript{14} His knowledge, reflecting as it does something apart from him, is legitimated and presented as universal, accessible to all. There is no power or politics in these notions of knowledge and experience.

An example of the way “experience” establishes the authority of the historian can be found in R. G. Collingwood’s, The Idea of History, the 1946 classic that has been required reading in historiography courses for several generations. For Collingwood, the ability of the historian to “reenact past experience” is tied to his autonomy, “where by autonomy I mean the condition of being one’s own authority, making statements or taking action on one’s own initiative and not because those statements or actions are authorized or prescribed by anyone else.”\textsuperscript{15} The question of where the historian is situated—who he is, how he is defined in relation to others, what the political effects of his history may be—never enters the discussion. Indeed, being free of these matters seems to be tied to Collingwood’s definition of autonomy, an issue so critical for him that he launches into an uncharacteristic tirade about it. In his quest for certainty, the historian must not let others make up his mind for him, Collingwood insists, because to do that means giving up his autonomy as an historian and allowing someone else to do for him what, if he is a scientific thinker, he can only do for himself. There is no need for me to offer the reader any proof of this statement.

If he knows anything of historical work, he already knows of his own experience that it is true. If he does not already know that it is true, he does not know enough about history to read this essay with any profit, and the best thing he can do is to stop here and now. (256)

For Collingwood it is axiomatic that experience is a reliable source of knowledge because it rests on direct contact between the historian’s perception and reality (even if the passage of time makes it necessary for the historian to imaginatively reenact events of the past). Thinking on his own means owning his own thoughts and this proprietary relationship guarantees an individual’s independence, his ability to read the past correctly, the authority of the knowledge he produces. The claim is not only for the historian’s autonomy, but also for his originality. Here “experience” grounds the identity of the researcher as an historian.

Another, very different use of “experience” can be found in E. P. Thompson’s Making of the English Working Class, the book that revolutionized social and labor history. Thompson specifically set out to free the concept of “class” from the ossified categories of Marxist structuralism. For this project “experience” was a key concept. His notion of experience joined ideas of external influence and subjective feeling, the structural and the psychological. This gave Thompson a mediating influence between social structure and social consciousness. For him experience meant “social being”—the lived realities of social life, especially the affective domains of family and religion and the symbolic dimensions of expression. This definition separated the affective and the symbolic from the economic and the rational. “People do not only experience their own experience as ideas, within thought and its procedures,” he maintained. “[T]hey also experience their own experience as feeling . . .” (171). This statement grants importance to the psychological dimension of experience, and it allows Thompson to account for agency. Feeling, Thompson insists, is “handled” culturally as “norms, familial and kinship obligations, . . . values or . . . within art and religious beliefs.” At the same time it somehow precedes these forms of expression and so provides an escape from a strong structural determination: “For any living generation, in any ’now,’” Thompson asserts, “the ways in which they ’handle’ experience defies prediction and escapes from any narrow definition or determination” (171).\textsuperscript{16}

And yet in his use of it, experience, because it is ultimately shaped by relations of production, is a unifying phenomenon, overriding other kinds of diversity. Since these relations of production are common to workers of different ethnicities, religions, regions, and trades, they necessarily provide a common denominator and they emerge as a more salient determinant of “experience” than anything else. In Thompson’s use of the term, experience is the start of a process that culminates in the realization and articulation of
social consciousness, in this case a common identity of class. It serves an integrating function, joining the individual and the structural and bringing together diverse people into that coherent (totalizing) whole which is a distinctive sense of class (170-71).

The unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience at least with any consequences for social organization or politics. When class becomes an overriding identity, other subject positions are subsumed by it, those of gender for example (or, in other instances of this kind of history, race, ethnicity, and sexuality). The positions of men and women and their different relationships to politics are taken as reflections of material and social arrangements rather than as products of class politics itself.

In Thompson’s account class is finally an identity rooted in structural relations that pre-exist politics. What this obscures is the contradictory and contested process by which class itself was conceptualized and by which diverse kinds of subject positions were assigned, felt, contested, or embraced. As a result, Thompson’s brilliant history of the English working class, which set out to historicize the category of class, ends up essentializing it. The ground may seem to be displaced from structure to agency by insisting on the subjectively felt nature of experience, but the problem Thompson sought to address isn’t really solved. Working-class “experience” is now the ontological foundation of working-class identity, politics, and history.

This use of experience has the same foundational status if we substitute women or African-American or lesbian or homosexual for working-class in the previous sentence. Among feminist historians, for example, “experience” has helped to legitimize a critique of the false claims to objectivity of traditional historical accounts. Part of the project of some feminist history has been to unmask all claims to objectivity as an ideological cover for masculine bias by pointing out the shortcomings, incompleteness, and exclusiveness of “mainstream” history. This has been achieved by providing documentation about women in the past which calls into question existing interpretations made without consideration of gender. But how authorize the new knowledge if the possibility of all historical objectivity has been questioned? By appealing to experience, which in this usage connotes both reality and its subjective apprehension—the experience of women in the past and of women historians who can recognize something of themselves in their foremothers.

Judith Newton, a literary historian, writing about the neglect of feminism by contemporary critical theorists, argues that women, too, arrived at the critique of objectivity usually associated with deconstruction or the New Historicism. This feminist critique “seemed to come straight out of reflection on our own, that is, [on] women’s experience, out of the contradictions we felt between the different ways we were represented even to ourselves, out of the inequities we had long experienced in our situations.” Newton’s appeal to experience seems to bypass the issue of objectivity (by not raising the question of whether feminist work can be objective), but it rests firmly on a foundational ground (experience). In her work the relationship between thought and experience is represented as transparent (the visual metaphor combines with the visceral) and so directly accessible, as it is in historian Christine Stansell’s insistence that “social practices” in all their “immediacy and entirety” constitute a domain of “sensuous experience” (a prediscursive reality directly felt, seen, and known) that cannot be subsumed by “language.” The effect of these kinds of statements, which attribute an indisputable authenticity to women’s experience, is to establish incontrovertibly women’s identity as people with agency. It is also to universalize the identity of women and so to ground claims for the legitimacy of women’s history in the shared experience of historians of women and those women whose stories they tell. In addition, it literally equates the personal with the political, for the lived experience of women is seen as leading directly to resistance to oppression, to feminism. Indeed, the possibility of politics is said to rest on, to follow from, a pre-existing women’s experience.

“Because of its drive towards a political massing together of women,” writes Denise Riley, “feminism can never wholeheartedly dishantle ‘women’s experience,’ however much this category conflates the attributed, the imposed, and the lived, and then sanctifies the resulting mélange.” The kind of argument for a women’s history (and for a feminist politics) that Riley criticizes closes down inquiry into the ways in which female subjectivity is produced, the ways in which agency is made possible, the ways in which race and sexuality intersect with gender, the ways in which politics organize and interpret experience—the ways in which identity is a contested terrain, the site of multiple and conflicting claims. In Riley’s words again, “it masks the likelihood that . . . [experiences] have accrued to women not by virtue of their womanhood alone, but as traces of domination, whether natural or political” (99). I would add as well that it masks the necessarily discursive character of these experiences.

But it is precisely the discursive character of experience that is at issue for some historians, because attributing experience to discourse seems somehow to deny its status as an unquestionable ground of explanation. This seems to be the case for John Toews, writing a long review article in the American Historical Review in 1987, called “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience.” The term “linguistic turn” is a comprehensive one used by Toews to refer to approaches to the study of meaning which draw on a number of disciplines, but especially on theories of language “since the primary medium of meaning was obviously language” (881). The question for Toews
is how far linguistic analysis has gone and should go especially in view of the poststructuralist challenge to foundationalism.

By definition, he argues, history is concerned with explanation; it is not a radical hermeneutics, but an attempt to account for the origin, persistence, and disappearance of certain meanings at "particular times and in specific socio-cultural situations" (882). For him explanation requires a separation of experience and meaning, experience is that reality which demands meaningful response. "Experience" in Toews's usage, is taken to be so self-evident that he never defines the term. (This is telling in an article that insists on establishing the importance and independence—the irreducibility—of "experience"). The absence of definition allows experience to take on many resonances, but it also allows it to function as a universally understood category—the undefined word creates a sense of consensus by attributing to it an assumed, stable, and shared meaning.

Experience, for Toews is a foundational concept. While recognizing that meanings differ and that the historian's task is to analyze the different meanings produced in societies and over time, Toews protects "experience" from this kind of relativism. In so doing he establishes the possibility for objective knowledge and so for communication among historians, however diverse their positions and views. This has an effect (among others) of removing historians from critical scrutiny as active producers of knowledge.

Since the phenomenon of experience itself can be analyzed outside the meanings given to it, the subjective position of historians then can seem to have nothing to do with the knowledge they produce. Toews's "experience" thus provides an object for historians that can be known apart from their own role as meaning makers and it then guarantees not only the objectivity of their knowledge, but their ability to persuade others of its importance.

Whatever diversity and conflict may exist among them, Toews's community of historians is rendered homogeneous by its shared object (experience). But as Ellen Rooney has so effectively pointed out, this kind of homogeneity can exist only because of the exclusion of the possibility that "historically irreducible interests divide and define . . . communities. . . ."24 Inclusiveness is achieved by denying that exclusion is inevitable, that difference is established through exclusion, and that the fundamental differences that accompany inequalities of power and position cannot be overcome by persuasion. In Toews's article no disagreement about the meaning of the term "experience" can be entertained, since experience itself lies somehow outside its signification. For that reason, perhaps, Toews never defined it.

Even among those historians who do not share all of Toews's ideas about the objectivity or continuous quality of history, writing the defense of "experience" works in much the same way: it establishes a realm of reality outside of discourse and it authorizes the historian who has access to it. The evidence of experience works as a foundation providing both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation, beyond which few questions need to or can be asked. And yet it is precisely the questions precluded—questions about discourse, difference, and subjectivity, as well as about what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination—that would enable us to historicize experience, to reflect critically on the history we write about it, rather than to premise our history upon it.

Historicizing "Experience"

How can we historicize "experience"? How can we write about identity without essentializing it? Answers to the second question ought to point toward answers to the first, since identity is tied to notions of experience, and since both identity and experience are categories usually taken for granted in ways that I am suggesting they ought not to be. It ought to be possible for historians to, in Gayatri Spivak's terms, "make visible the assignment of subject-positions," not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced and which processes themselves are unremarked, indeed achieve their effect because they aren't noticed.25 To do this a change of object—seems to be required, one which takes the emergence of concepts and identities as historical events in need of explanation. This does not mean that one dismisses the effects of such concepts and identities, that one does not explain behavior in terms of their operations. It does mean assuming that the appearance of a new identity is not inevitable or determined, not something that was always there simply waiting to be expressed, not something that "always existed in the form it was given in a particular political movement or at a particular historical moment.

The fact is "black" has never been just there either [writes Stuart Hall]. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as "black." Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s.26

To take the history of Jamaican black identity as an object of inquiry in these terms is necessarily to analyze subject positioning, in part at least, as the effect of discourses that placed Jamaica in a late-twentieth-century, in-
international-racist political economy; it is to historicize the “experience” of blackness.

Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is not to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between “experience” and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being “subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise.” These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited. Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two.

The question then becomes how to analyze language, and here historians often (though not always and not necessarily) confront the limits of a discipline that has typically constructed itself in opposition to literature. (These limits have to do with a referential conception of language, the belief in a direct relationship between words and things). The kind of reading I have in mind would not assume a direct correspondence between words and things, nor confine itself to single meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradiction. It would not render process as linear, nor rest explanation on simple correlations or single variables. Rather it would grant to “the literary” an integral, even irreducible, status of its own. To grant such status is not to make “the literary” foundational, but to open new possibilities for analyzing discursive productions of social and political reality as complex, contradictory processes.

The reading I offered of Delany at the beginning of this essay is an example of the kind of reading I want to avoid. I would like now to present another reading—one suggested to me by literary critic Karen Swann—as a way of indicating what might be involved in historicizing the notion of experience. It is also a way of agreeing with and appreciating Swann’s argument about “the importance of the literary to the historical project.”

For Delany, witnessing the scene at the bathhouse (an “undulating mass of naked male bodies” seen under a dim blue light) was an event. It marked what in one kind of reading we would call a coming to consciousness of himself, a recognition of his authentic identity, one he had always shared, would always share with others like himself. Another kind of reading, closer to Delany’s preoccupation with memory and the self in this autobiography, sees this event not as the discovery of truth (conceived as the reflection of a prediscursive reality), but as the substitution of one interpretation for another. Delany presents this substitution as a conversion experience, a clarifying moment, after which he sees (that is, understands) differently. But there is all the difference between subjective perceptual clarity and transparent vision; one does not necessarily follow from the other even if the subjective state is metaphorically presented as a visual experience. Moreover (and this is Swann’s point), “the properties of the medium through which the visible appears—here, the dim blue light, whose distorting, refracting qualities produce a wavering of the visible,” make any claim to unmediated transparency impossible. Instead, the wavering light permits a vision beyond the visible, a vision that contains the fantastic projections (“millions of gay men” for whom “history had, actively and already, created . . . whole galleries of institutions”) that are the basis for political identification. “In this version of the story,” Swann notes, “political consciousness and power originate, not in a presumably unmediated experience of presumably real gay identities, but out of an apprehension of the moving, differing properties of the representational medium—the motion of light in water.”

The question of representation is central to Delany’s memoir. It is a question of social categories, personal understanding, and language, all of which are connected, none of which are or can be a direct reflection of the others. What does it mean to be black, gay, a writer, he asks, and is there a realm of personal identity possible apart from social constraint? The answer is that the social and the personal are imbricated in one another and that both are historically variable. The meanings of the categories of identity change and with them possibilities for thinking the self:

[A]t that time, the words “black” and “gay”—for openers—didn’t exist with their current meanings, usage, history. 1961 had still been, really, part of the fifties. The political consciousness that was to form by the end of the sixties had not been part of my world. There were only Negroes and homosexuals, both of whom—along with artists—were hugely devalued in the social hierarchy. It’s even hard to speak of that world.

But the available social categories aren’t sufficient for Delany’s story. It is difficult, if not impossible to use a single narrative to account for his experience. Instead he makes entries in a notebook, at the front about material things, at the back about sexual desire. These are “parallel narratives, in parallel columns.” Although one seems to be about society, the public, the political, and the other about the individual, the private, the psychological, in fact both narratives are inescapably historical; they are discursive
productions of knowledge of the self, not reflections either of external or internal truth. “That the two columns must be the Marxist and the Freudian—the material column and the column of desire—is only a modernist prejudice. The autonomy of each is subverted by the same excesses, just as severely.” 36 The two columns are constitutive of one another, yet the relationship between them is difficult to specify. Do the social and economic determine the subjective? Is the private entirely separate from or completely integral to the public? Delany voices the desire to resolve the problem: “Certainly one must be the lie that is illuminated by the other’s truth.” 37 And then he denies that resolution is possible since answers to these questions do not exist apart from the discourses that produce them.

If it is the split—the space between the two columns (one resplendent and lucid with the writings of legitimacy, the other dark and hollow with the voices of the illegitimate)—that constitutes the subject, it is only after the Romantic inflation of the private into the subjective that such a split can even be located. That locus, that margin, that split itself first allows, then demands the appropriation of language—now spoken, now written—in both directions, over the gap. 38

It is finally by tracking “the appropriation of language . . . in both directions, over the gap,” and by situating and contextualizing that language that one historicizes the terms by which experience is represented, and so historicizes “experience” itself.

**Conclusion**

Reading for “the literary” does not seem at all inappropriate for those whose discipline is devoted to the study of change. It is not the only kind of reading I am advocating, although more documents than those written by literary figures are susceptible to such readings. Rather, it is a way of changing the focus and the philosophy of our history, from one bent on naturalizing “experience” through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things, to one that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent. How have categories of representation and analysis—such as class, race, gender, relations of production, biology, identity, subjectivity, agency, experience, even culture—achieved their foundational status? What have been the effects of their articulations? What does it mean for historians to study the past in terms of these categories; for individuals to think of themselves in these terms? What is the relationship between the salience of such categories in our own time and their existence in the past? Questions such as these open consideration of what Dominick LaCapra has referred to as the “transferential” relationship between the historian and the past, that is, of the relationship between the power of the historian’s analytic frame and the events that are the object of his or her study. And they historicize both sides of that relationship by denying the fixity and transcendence of anything that appears to operate as a foundation, turning attention instead to the history of foundationalist concepts themselves. The history of these concepts (understood to be contested and contradictory) then becomes the evidence by which “experience” can be grasped and by which the historian’s relationship to the past she writes about can be articulated. This is what Foucault meant by genealogy:

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an original, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent and surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process. 39

Experience is not a word we can do without, although it is tempting, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion. It serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is “unassailable.” 40 Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and to redefine its meaning. This entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of “experience” and on the politics of its construction. Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself. Such an analysis would constitute a genuinely non-foundationalist history, one which retains its explanatory power and its interest in change but does not stand on or reproduce naturalized categories. 41 It also cannot guarantee the historian’s neutrality, for the choice of which categories to historicize is inevitably “political,” necessarily tied to the histo-
rian’s recognition of his/her stake in the production of knowledge. Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects, it instead interrogates the processes of their creation, and, in so doing, reforges history and the role of the historian, and opens new ways for thinking about change.42

NOTES

A longer version of this paper appeared in Critical Inquiry, 17 (Summer 1991) pp. 773–97.

I am grateful for their critical advice to Judith Butler, Christina Crosby, Nicholas Dirks, Christopher Fyock, Clifford Geertz, Donna Haraway, Susan Harding, Gyan Prakash, Donald Scott, William Sewell, Jr., Karen Swn, and Elizabeth Weed.


5. On the “documentary” or “objectivist” model used by historians, see Dominick LaCapra, “Rhetoric and History,” in Dominick LaCapra, History and Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 15–44.


7. I am grateful to Judith Butler for discussions on this point.


My discussion in this paragraph paraphrases much of Williams’s definition. Page numbers of citations are indicated in parentheses in the text.


11. Homi Bhabha puts it this way: “To see a missing person, or to look at Invisibleness, is to emphasize the subject’s transitive demand for a direct object of self-reflection; a point of presence which would maintain its privileged enunciatory position qua subject,” in “Interrogating Identity,” p. 5.


16. Raymond Williams’s discussion of “structures of feeling” takes on some of these same issues in a more extended way. See his The Long Revolution (New York: Columbia University Press 1961), and the interview about it in Raymond Williams, Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 156–74. I am grateful to Chun Lin for directing me to these texts.


21. This is one of the meanings of the slogan “the personal is the political.” Personal knowledge (i.e., experience) of oppression is the source of resistance to it. For critiques of this position, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience,” copyright, 1 (Fall 1987), p. 32; and Katie King, “The Situation of Lesbianism as Feminism’s Magical Sign: Contests for Meaning and the U.S. Women’s Movement, 1968–1972,” Communication, 9 (1986), pp. 65–91. Catharine MacKinnon’s work is probably the best example of the uses of “experience” Mohanty, King, and I are criticizing; see her Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

Feminism and George Sand: 
Lettres à Marcie

Naomi Schor

FEMINISME: n.m. (1837; du lat. fémina). 1° Doctrine qui préconise l'extension des droits, du rôle de la femme dans la société. Le féminisme politique des suffragettes. 2° Méd. Aspect d'un individu mâle qui présente certains caractères secondaires du sexe féminin.


The episode is well known. In 1848, at the height of pre-election fever, a group of feminists gathered at the Club de la rue Taranne proposed the candidacy of George Sand to the National Assembly. Two days after the publication of that motion in La Voix des femmes (6 April 1848), George Sand sent a letter to the editors of La Réforme and La Vraie République, in which she curtly shoots down this ill-timed nomination:

[Paris, 8 April 1848]

Sir:

A newspaper edited by some women has proclaimed my candidacy to the National Assembly. If this jest did not injure my pride, by attributing to me a ridiculous presumption, I would let it pass, like all those of which all of us in this world can become the object. But my silence might lead people to believe that I support the principles of which this newspaper