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# WESTERN HISTORY: WHAT'S GENDER GOT TO DO WITH IT?

MARGARET JACOBS

**I**N A RECENT ESSAY, Susan Lee Johnson takes western historians to task for neglecting western women's and gender history in their work.<sup>1</sup> When *Western Historical Quarterly* asked me to write this essay on the impact of western women's and gender history on our field, I thought it would be an ideal opportunity to test Johnson's bold assertions. But how do you measure such impact? I could have highlighted some of the outstanding works that western women's and gender historians have produced in the last thirty years, but I thought it might be more useful and telling to analyze general western history works. I decided to look at the winners since 2000 of the Western History Association's annual Caughey Western History Association Prize for the best book in western history and to examine the extent to which these books have incorporated analyses of women and gender.

Five of the last eleven winners of the Caughey Prize concentrate on individual men (Charles M. Russell, John Sutter, Buffalo Bill Cody, John Wesley Powell, and Brigham Young). Four focus on groups of American Indians (Sioux, Comanches, Nez Perce, and American Indians in the West prior to 1800). Two synthetic textbooks of western history round out the field.<sup>2</sup> After reading all eleven books in quick succession, my initial

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Lee Johnson, "Nail This To Your Door: A Disputation on the Power, Efficacy, and Indulgent Delusion of Western Scholarship That Neglects the Challenge of Gender and Women's History," *Pacific Historical Review* 79 (November 2010): 605–17.

<sup>2</sup> The 2000–2010 Caughey Prize winners are Walter Nugent, *Into the West: The Story of Its People* (New York, 1999); Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, 2000); Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York, 2001); Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman, 2002); Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln, 2003); Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (New York, 2004); Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York, 2005); Albert L.

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impressions were 1) that my colleagues in the field of western history include some wonderful thinkers and writers and 2) that I had overdosed on testosterone. All but one book required me to dig deep to find the incorporation of women or gender. None of the books *completely* ignores women, yet in most cases, their inclusion is minimal (often just a few sentences), tokenistic, or uninformed by the most recent scholarship. Despite good intentions, most of the authors portray women as passive victims or as fulfilling unchanging roles in the domestic realm. Although centering primarily on men as historical actors, only two books treat men as gendered subjects, both influenced by and actively shaping the masculine ideals of their times. Thus, at least from this small sample, I can only conclude, like Johnson, that the field of western women's and gender history has made little impact on the larger field of western history. In this essay, I probe why this might be so and why it matters.

Historians have cultivated the field of western women's and gender history for more than thirty years. They initially focused on white women in the nineteenth century, mainly as travelers on the Overland Trail, homesteaders and ranchers, and suffragists and reformers.<sup>3</sup> But ever self-critical, nearly as soon as the field began, many western gender historians called for more multicultural approaches that decentered the white pioneer woman; covered the experiences and perspectives of Native American, Mexican, Asian, and African American women; and moved beyond the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Other historians began to explore sexuality and gender, including masculinity.<sup>5</sup> Western women's and gender historians have moved toward increasingly integrated works that treat gender as intimately bound up with race, class, labor, sexuality, politics, economics,

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Hurtado, *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier* (Norman, 2006); B. Byron Price, ed., *Charles M. Russell: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Norman, 2007); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, 2008); and Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (New York, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, 1979); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York, 1979); and Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 173–213. For a few important works from the 1990s about women of color in the West, see Valerie J. Matsumoto, *Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California, 1919–1982* (Ithaca, 1993); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley, 1995); and Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1998). See Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York, 1990), for an analysis of cross-cultural interactions between women in the West and a pathbreaking critique of white women's racialized reform.

<sup>5</sup> Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, 1991); Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque, 1999); and James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2001). Many women's and gender historians also analyze the history of sexuality, but this field has developed independently of women's and gender history and warrants its own separate treatment.

and environment; many of these books have won critical acclaim and major awards.<sup>6</sup> Yet, if we are to judge by the Caughey Prize-winning authors, the more recent scholarship of the last two decades has made little impact on the larger field of western history.

Since four of the books look at American Indians, I examined how each one covered recent scholarship on American Indian women's status within their societies and how this changed with colonization. Early scholarship from the 1970s accepted the notion of the universal subordination of women and recapitulated early male European observations that Indian women were downtrodden beasts of burden. But since the 1980s, a number of scholars have challenged such formulations, arguing instead that in many tribes prior to European contact, women enjoyed autonomy and authority in many facets of life even if they rarely held formal power. Scholars have vigorously debated, too, how colonization changed gender roles within Native societies. Historians such as Theda Perdue have shown us how questions of women's status and Indian peoples' changing gender orders have much to do with questions of colonization, resistance, and cultural continuity.<sup>7</sup>

This vibrant scholarship seems to have exerted minimal influence on the prize-winners. The most recent Caughey winner, Elliott West's *The Last Indian War*, mentions in just one sentence that plant gathering was women's work. In *One Vast Winter Count*, Colin G. Calloway notes that archaeologists have perpetuated a "man the hunter" image that ignores women and children" and asserts that "a full picture of Paleo-Indian life should include 'woman the hunter' and portray people pulling up wild plants more often than bringing down hairy mammoths."<sup>8</sup> Hurrah! But Calloway only covers Native women in early sections of the book. Once Europeans arrive on the scene and the drama of conquest and colonization begins to play out, he drops women almost entirely from the narrative, inadvertently conveying the commonly held notion that women's lives are timeless and exist outside history. Ironically, this once was the view of Indian peoples too.

Both Jeffrey Ostler, in *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*, and Pekka Hämäläinen, in *The Comanche Empire*, pay some attention

<sup>6</sup> The 2000, 2001, and 2003 Bancroft Prizes went to three integrated western histories: Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, 2000); and Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*.

<sup>7</sup> See Lillian A. Ackerman, *A Necessary Balance: Gender and Power among Indians of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman, 2003); Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman, eds., *Women and Power in Native North America* (Norman, 1995); Virginia Bergman Peters, *Women of the Earth Lodges: Tribal Life on the Plains* (North Haven, CT, 1995); Janet Spector, *What this Aul Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (St. Paul, 1993); Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630–1900* (Berkeley, 1992); Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (Lanham, MD, 1983); and Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> West, *Last Indian War*, 9 and Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 43, 44.

to changing women's roles; they mention that the labor of robe dressing and meat processing among Sioux and Comanche women, respectively, increased dramatically as a result of men's bison hunting for the market. Along with the expansion of polygyny, Hämäläinen argues that this "seems to have produced a marked decline in [women's] overall social status." While such attention to women is welcome, Lakota scholars including Beatrice Medicine have argued against such simple formulations, and both Ostler and Hämäläinen could benefit from a more searching and extensive analysis of Native women's changing roles.<sup>9</sup>

Both Calloway and Hämäläinen aim to "recover the full dimension of Indian agency in early American history," yet they neglect Indian women's agency. In Hämäläinen's book, Comanche women appear primarily as downtrodden victims without voice or will. For example, in regard to the capture of Comanche women, he remarks that the pain of captivity "must have been especially excruciating for those men whose wives, children, and relatives were among the dead or captured."<sup>10</sup> Such sentences subtly convey that Hämäläinen considers *male* subjectivity significant, not female experience or perspective.

Like Hämäläinen, who states his desire "to recover Comanches as full-fledged humans and undiminished historical actors underneath the distorting layers of historical memory," western women's and gender historians have committed themselves to not just showing that women were present in the West or that they were victimized, but that they, too, were actors. A common excuse for failing to include women as historical actors is an apparent lack of sources. Juliana Barr's *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman* should put to rest this tired defense. Noting that women were "sometimes pawns, sometimes agents," she places them at the center of the violent and diplomatic exchanges that occurred among Indians and Spaniards in the Texas borderlands. Her work challenges historians to read their sources more carefully.<sup>11</sup>

Two of the books—Albert L. Hurtado's biography of John Sutter and the Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher text *The American West*—give some attention to a well-researched topic within western women's and gender history: interracial sexual relationships in the fur trade. Scholars have found compelling evidence for Native women's central roles in the fur trade as important mediators between their tribes and European traders and trappers.<sup>12</sup> Despite this rich scholarship, Hine and Faragher

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<sup>9</sup> Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 248 and Beatrice Medicine, *Learning to Be an Anthropologist and Remaining "Native"* (Urbana, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 7, 52 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 345 and Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 247.

<sup>12</sup> A sample of some of this rich scholarship includes Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman, 1983); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, 1980); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst, 2001); and Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North*

downplay Native women's crucial agency in the fur trade, instead writing from the point of view of male European actors and reducing Native women to sexual objects. Fur trappers at the annual rendezvous "bargained with Indian women, compliant in the soft grasses."<sup>13</sup> Such sentences also obscure the complicated and often exploitative histories of cross-cultural sexual encounters.

Hine and Faragher's book, Walter Nugent's demographic history *Into the West*, and Will Bagley's *Blood of the Prophets* all integrate some early western women's scholarship on white pioneering and homesteading women. While Hine and Faragher and Nugent capture some of the agency of white women moving into the West, Bagley diminishes such women to domestic drudges. For example, in his discussion of emigrant families on the Overland Trail, he contends that while men were engaged in all manner of sociable activities, "[w]omen found camp life little different from the endless drudgery they knew everywhere else on the frontier."<sup>14</sup> This seemingly sympathetic portrayal has the unintended effect of trivializing women's work and subtly maintaining the long-held notion that performing domestic labor constitutes the defining characteristic of women's lives. As with portrayals of Native American women, we are left with the impression that the lives of women never change and thus are outside the realm of history.

Curiously, despite voluminous scholarship on the subject, few of these award-winning authors cover the western women's suffrage movement or the many reform movements such as temperance, environmentalism, and American Indian rights that engaged many (mostly white) women.<sup>15</sup> Although writing textbooks on the West, neither Hine and Faragher nor Nugent include the subject. Donald Worster, in *A River Running West*, and B. Byron Price, in his biography of Russell, mention the topic in passing. Only Louis S. Warren, in his nuanced treatment of his subject in *Buffalo Bill's America*, analyzes how Cody constructed his show to appeal in part to audiences of professional women who would have supported suffrage and reform.

Additionally, none of the authors incorporate the relatively newer scholarship on women of color in the West. However, Nugent does liberally sprinkle stories of these women throughout his text to illustrate his demographic points. Thus, my sample shows that some authors have selectively incorporated the very earliest scholarship on white women pioneers but have neglected other, often more recent studies of women in reform and women of color.

Gender ideologies and systems, including changing conceptions and experiences of manhood and masculinity, also interest western women's and gender historians.<sup>16</sup>

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*American Fur Trade* (Lincoln, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Hine and Faragher, *American West*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> See Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*; Valerie Sherer Mathes, *Helen Hunt Jackson and Her Indian Reform Legacy* (Norman, 1997); and Rebecca Mead, *How the Vote Was Won: Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868–1914* (New York, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> In his acclaimed book *Captives and Cousins*, Brooks showed the critical importance of

Refreshingly, three books consider the role of masculinity in western history. Hämäläinen includes a detailed section on masculinity in Comanche society and concludes, "If there was an all-embracing internal force behind the rise of the Comanche empire, it was the relentless competition for social prestige among Comanche men."<sup>17</sup> Curiously, though, he does not raise this issue until page 269, instead of foregrounding it in his introduction and throughout the text.

Two prizewinners study how masculinity influenced the creation of the mythic West: Hine and Faragher, in their chapter "Myth of the West," and Warren, most prominently in his chapter "Domesticating the Wild West." Here, Warren asserts, "as much as the Wild West show expressed anxieties over racial decay and the new immigration, it was also part of gathering cultural reaction against the cult of domesticity."<sup>18</sup> Given that Russell's art helped to define the mythic West as a masculine space, one would expect to find a similar analysis of masculinity in a book on his art, but Price did not include it. Similarly, since three other prizewinners focus on individual men in the West—Powell, Sutter, and Young—all could benefit from attention to the influence of changing masculine ideals and norms in their lives. Instead, just as "whites" were once considered to be without race, men are still too often considered to have no gender.

In sum, while each of these eleven books contains at least one reference to women or gender, only Warren's biography of Cody engages with and adequately incorporates gender scholarship regarding masculinity, domesticity and the home, and women's increasing public reform activities at the turn of the twentieth century. He successfully weaves a gendered analysis throughout his book and covers several women as very active agents in the making of the Wild West Show—Annie Oakley, predictably, but also Libbie Custer, Adele Von Ohl Parker, Margaret Whittaker, and Native women such as Calls the Name. In short, Warren models how to write western history with careful attention to gender. Unfortunately, his approach is more the exception than the rule.

What are we to make of this lack of gender in western history? Perhaps the simplest explanation is a prosaic one. As historians, we narrow our topics to make them manageable and readable. It would be impossible for any western historian to include every subfield in her or his treatment of a subject. Such attempts might make our narratives too diffuse and unfocused. This pragmatic defense, however, rests on the belief that histories of women and gender are minor subfields that are irrelevant to "real" western history.

Gender is often (mis)understood as a code word for women, and, if a historian is writing about "male" activities such as warfare, he (or she) might ask, "What's gender got to do with it?" This is akin to asking, "Why include race?" Most western historians

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considering contending masculinities among Indian peoples and Spaniards as a primary factor in explaining the captive trade in the Southwest. See also Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (New York, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 269.

<sup>18</sup> Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, 215.



recognize the significance of race to understanding the history of the American West. Yet, although gender is fundamental to the ordering of society and the creation of individual and collective identities, a similar understanding of the relevance of gender does not pervade the field of western history.

Gender history analyzes the changing meaning and value attached to maleness and femaleness and the relationship between the two. Gender manifests itself in production (economics and labor) and reproduction (both physical and social), bedrocks of any society. Gender rarely works in isolation from other identifying markers and means of acquiring power and status, such as race, age, religious authority, and national identity or citizenship. Because of its link to power, gender is often contested and is rarely static. Moreover, it is inextricably bound up with colonialism, which is, of course, inseparable from the history of the West.<sup>19</sup> To neglect, overlook, or dismiss gender as irrelevant means that historians are not representing the fullest possible picture of the past. And isn't that our collective task?

To some extent, the marginalization of women and gender in major western history works may also derive from a certain stagnation in western women's and gender history. In fact, in a recent forum in the *Pacific Historical Review*, I lament the continued focus on white women and the inadequacy of a multicultural approach in the field. What is needed to reinvigorate the subject, I argue, is to bring our scholarship in conversation with global histories of gender and colonialism. In the same forum, Karen Leong contends that "the imaginary of the American West" continues to exert an "ideological chokehold" on the field, narrowing the scope and possibility of western women's and gender history.<sup>20</sup> As a result, those of us who practice western women's and gender history can be active agents in creating histories of women and gender in the West that are impossible to ignore.

That doesn't leave other western historians off the hook, however. Many have failed to truly integrate women's and gender scholarship into their work because they are unable to slot women into existing narratives in which they have constructed men as the universal subjects. For example, Hämäläinen asserts that the Comanches and Utes were "[l]iberated and empowered by the horse."<sup>21</sup> Given that he also claims that the adoption of the horse led to a decline in Native women's status, his horse-as-empowerment narrative becomes untenable. The genuine incorporation of western women's and gender history would fundamentally challenge many western history

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<sup>19</sup> Canadian historians have also linked gender and colonialism in Canada's West. See Sarah Carter, *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* (Edmonton, 2008) and Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Margaret D. Jacobs, "Getting out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women's History," *Pacific Historical Review* 79 (November 2010): 585–604 and Karen Leong, "Still Walking, Still Brave: Mapping Gender, Race, and Power in U.S. Western History," *Pacific Historical Review* 79 (November 2010): 627.

<sup>21</sup> Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 29.



narratives. Thus, our histories of the West would become more complex and nuanced. Surely that is a good thing.

As we look to the future of our field, we should strive for full inclusion of gender, not because it is politically correct or academically trendy (as some historians have been known to scornfully mutter) but because it is *historically* correct. We should challenge ourselves as western historians to remain curious and alert to new possibilities of inquiry and to ask, indeed, “What’s gender got to do with it?”

