

and became more organized, especially through the misleading opposition between self-consciously literary texts and feminized didactic works. Realist writers, for instance, incorporated many elements of the sentimental, even as they defined their movement against it (W. Morgan 2004); later, modernists were still more dismissive. In literary history during the twentieth century, the sentimental tradition was more and more thoroughly erased—until feminist scholars insisted that it was worthy of attention. Since that time both literary and cultural history have been rewritten. But American cultural studies continues to oscillate between affirming the sentimental as an expression of women's values and denouncing it as oppressive. Both of these perspectives have merit, and current scholarship is integrating them in a more fully historicized and critical view. But the term will remain charged and complex so long as our maps of the self and the world are divided between public and private, reason and emotion. The sentimental is a hinge that swings between the social and the subjective—reminding us, if we are willing to listen, that they are always connected.

57

## Sex

Bruce Burgett

In common usage, the keyword “sex” names something an individual either is or has. It refers to both the material foundation (male or female) of binary gender difference (masculine or feminine), and the real and imagined acts that ground various sexual identities (homosexual, heterosexual, fetishist, sado-masochist, and so on). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) dates the first sense of “sex” as male or female from the fourteenth century, though it also notes a more pluralized usage from the sixteenth century (“so are all sexes and sorts of people called upon”), a singular usage from the same period (“I am called The Squire of Dames, or the Servant of the Sex”), and a further revision in the early nineteenth century (“the third sex”). In contrast, the *OED* dates the second sense of the term from the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when “sexual” (“Berlin is outbidding Paris in its sexual immorality”) and “sexuality” (“Precocious sexuality . . . interferes with normal mental growth”) began to reference a discrete domain of physical and mental acts isolated from other corporeal appetites, imaginative practices, and forms of social relation. Coincident with these developments was the emergence of terms such as “heterosexual” and “homosexual” that name and police specifically “sexual” orientations and preferences, as well as the largely medical or scientific usage of the verb “to sex,” meaning to identify

a plant or animal as male or female ("The . . . barbarous phrase 'collecting a specimen' and then of 'sexing' it").

The last of these mutations in the term's etymology reveals the growing belief in the late nineteenth century that sex and sexual identities were discrete and deadly serious matters best overseen by scientific, clerical, and juridical authorities, including well-known "sexologists" ranging from Sigmund Freud to Alfred Kinsey (Irvine 1990; Terry 1999). Yet the specific usage chosen by the *OED* editors also documents a critical response to those new forms of power, one that satirized the labeling practices of civil authorities as "barbaric." As Raymond Williams pointed out when he added "sex" to his revised edition of *Keywords* in 1983, the early twentieth century marked a continued boom in the production of terms and terminology, nearly all of which carried both positive and negative valences: "sexy" and "sex appeal," "sex repression" and "sex expression," "undersexed" and "oversexed." It is significant that Williams's revision itself coincided with the entry of feminist politics and methodologies into the institution that many regard as the origin of cultural studies as a field—the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Williams's short entry concluded with phrases coined within the Anglo-American feminisms of the 1960s and 70s: "sexism" and "sexist" (terms he saw as derived from "racism" and "racist"), "sex-objects" and "gender." But his focus on the first meaning of "sex" (male or female) led him to neglect the more promiscuous politics of the contemporary "sexual revolu-

tion." Centre director Stuart Hall (1991, 282) commented in a retrospective history that feminism had, in the late 1970s, "interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies." Had he been writing a few years later, he might (or might not) have added that lesbian-gay and queer activism had done the same.

As indicated by this lacuna, the keyword "sex" continues to draw much of its force from its dual referent. In academic research, nearly as frequently as in popular discourse, mainstream scholars still wed "sex" (male or female) to "sexuality" (homo- or hetero-), applying what feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990) famously called a "heterosexual matrix" across a wide array of disciplinary and interdisciplinary research fields, often by relying implicitly on the concept of biological reproduction. A more critical approach also assumes that "sex" is the real-life referent for studies of both gender and sexuality, but then shifts its attention away from questions concerning the physical foundations of sex and toward a focus on the relations of power that have organized historically variable constructions of gender and sexuality. This social-constructivist form of analysis draws its force in large part from the feminist insistence that "gender," understood as a cultural or social system, can be neither reduced to nor deduced from "sex," understood as a biological destiny that, with rare exceptions, makes men "masculine" and women "feminine." It also profits from the related move within "sex-positive" strains of feminism and, more recently, queer theory to suggest that the critical study of sex and sexuality

has no more intimate relation to the study of gender than it does to that of any other system of cultural or social classification (Rubin 1984; Sedgwick 1990). The result has been the development of a new and paradoxical common sense: Sex tends to be treated today as a stable category of analysis, even as it is said to require scrutiny for the ways in which it intersects with other axes of social recognition and power, including gender, race, class, religion, region, and ability, among many others (Harper et al. 1997).

Take as a representative example of this paradox a passage from one of the most canonical (and useful) surveys of the history of sexuality written about the United States: John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman's *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1988, 1997). Appearing in the context of a discussion of nineteenth-century same-sex romantic friendships, the passage begins with the assertion that "the overlap of the romantic, erotic, and physical has made it difficult to define these relationships, especially in light of the way sexual meanings have changed in the twentieth century," and includes a criticism of more conventional historians who have responded to this difficulty by assuming that such relationships were devoid of "sex" (121). D'Emilio and Freedman then raise the related and apparently more vexing question of what counts as "sex," opening a new paragraph with the following assertion: "However difficult it may be to know whether sexual—that is, genital—relations characterized particular same-sex friendships, it is clear that the meaning of same-sex love gradually changed over the course of the nineteenth century"

(122). Typical of much social-constructivist historiography, this epistemological compromise is notable in two ways: It draws on and confirms the key insight of constructivist research on the history of sexuality by insisting that the social and cultural meanings of "sex" vary over time and place; however, it fails to apply that insight to a critical analysis of the foundational categories of "sex" and "sexual," both of which are equated in the passage with the "genital." What is the difference, a skeptical reader might ask, between a history of sexuality and a history of genitality, either in "America" or elsewhere?

One answer to this question comes from a strand of research influenced by the writings of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976, 1978) and later interviews (2006), Foucault extended the logic of the constructivist critique by historicizing not just the diverse meanings of sex and sexuality, but also the categories themselves. His history concerned not real-life things called "sex" and "sexuality," but the ways those concepts have come to structure contemporary thinking about political relations among bodies, sensations, appetites, and pleasures. This approach broke decisively with academic research in historical and sociological fields built on the empiricist assumption that "sex" and its related terms named things in the world that could be counted, quantified, and archived. It also broke with the tendency in psychology and political theory to treat sex as a physical drive that encounters power primarily through mechanisms of repression or liberation. Some of the resulting work

produced by Foucault and his many followers displayed a penchant for periodization, quibbling over the precise historical moment when a given term (“sex,” “sexual,” “sexuality,” “homosexuality,” “heterosexuality”) came into common usage. But more important was the shift in the way research questions and conversations about sex were formulated and shaped. No longer concerned primarily with mapping the many varieties of human sexual expression or contributing to the related debates about how sex could be best liberated or repressed, this newer research asked a more fundamental question: When, where, and in what specific contexts has sex been abstracted from the relations of power within which some corporeal practices, social formations, and political ideologies become “sexualized” and others do not?

The novelty of this critical turn in the study of sex and sexuality has often been overstated, as Gayle Rubin (2002) has pointed out in a careful reconstruction of the earlier groundbreaking work of scholars in the fields of interactionist sociology, cultural anthropology, social history, and even minority forms of sexology. But it is undeniable that the rapid and wide dissemination of Foucault’s writings both inside and outside of academic circles galvanized a new critical consensus that began to coalesce in the 1990s under the rubrics of queer theory and, in its more institutionalized form, queer studies. Across the fields of American studies and cultural studies, this research has produced work on a broad range of historical sites, social movements, policy initiatives, legal debates, and aesthetic forms: Oral historians and ethnographers

have traced the ways in which the question of what did and did not count as a sexual practice or identity shaped the lives of men in the rural south and across the Filipino diaspora (John Howard 2001; Manalansan 2003); social and cultural historians have detailed the intersections of emergent constructions of sex as an isolable danger, the racialization of underclass and migrant labor populations, and the promotion of top-down health and welfare policies (Patton 1996; Shah 2001); historians of science have excavated the contested origins of sex as a core concept in the biological and natural sciences (Schiebinger 1989; Laqueur 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2000); cultural and social critics have discussed the deployment of the concept of sex as a strategic means of undermining egalitarian urban planning and democratic public space (Mumford 1997; Berlant and Warner 1998; Delany 2001); legal and literary theorists have archived and critiqued the ways in which sex figures into immigration policy, military recruitment, and cultural canon formation (Halley 1999; Luibhéid 2002; Ferguson 2004).

Given the scope of this new research, one danger today may be that sex is being asked to do too much critical and conceptual work (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005). Such a worry opens onto a more political version of the question that has restructured much of the recent historiography: How, to what ends, and in what specific contexts have scholars and activists generated the intellectual abstractions and disciplinary frameworks that allow for the treatment of sex as an entity that stands on its own? An answer to this question would need to take into account several het-

erogeneous developments in the later half of the twentieth century: the mid-century naturalization of “sex” as the core of identity formation and psychological development; the late-century move to isolate “sex” as a category of analysis located at the center of lesbian-gay and queer studies; the more recent rise of a gay neoconservatism that insists on bracketing the politics of sexuality from a wider social justice agenda; the many vernacular discourses and dissident practices that have clustered around sex and sexuality throughout the period (Duggan 2004b; Burgett 2005). These diverse intellectual, political, and social formations are neither reducible to a core ideology nor elements of a linear history. But they do suggest that one challenge for future work organized around the keyword “sex” may be to produce research that is more episodic than sequential, more local (and trans-local) than national. Such scholarship needs to focus both on those moments and places where “sex” becomes available as an isolable way of thinking about and experiencing oneself and one’s relations to others, and on those moments and places where “it” does not. The corresponding task, which may call for even greater inventiveness and creativity, involves the archiving and cultivation of alternative vocabularies for thinking and talking about bodies, pleasures, and the political relations between and among them.

58

## Slavery

Walter Johnson

“Slavery has never been represented, slavery never can be represented,” said the novelist, antislavery lecturer, and former slave William Wells Brown in 1847 (18). Brown referred, in the first instance, to the world-making violence of the system of kidnapping, dispossession, and labor extraction that emerged in the fifteenth century and persisted almost to the dawn of the twentieth. But he referred in the second instance to a sort of epistemological violence, a murderous, forcible forgetting of the history of slavery. Only slavery’s victims—if it is possible to use the word “only” in the context of so many millions of stolen lives—might have truly told the story he wanted to tell. Brown reminds us that we approach the history of slavery by way of whispers and shadows, where truth has often been hidden in half truth in order to be saved away for the future. We approach it, that is to say, across a field of argument in which the history of slavery has often been conscripted to the economic, political, and imperial purposes that have hidden inside the word “freedom.”

Over the four centuries of Atlantic slavery, millions of Africans and their descendants were turned into profits, fancies, sensations, and possessions of New World whites. The vast majority of the enslaved were agricultural workers whose lives were devoted to the production of staple crops (sugar, tobacco, indigo,