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GENDERING
EMPIRE

A Historiographical Exploration

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'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.

'Decolonisation is the veritable creation of new men'.

Simone de Beauvoir's articulation of gender emphasises its social construction, describing how the identity of being 'a woman' is not a biological reality but one that individuals have to transform, contort into, and inhabit. In her landmark work in feminist theory *The Second Sex*, she argues how gender is a totalising, transformative social experience. In this essay, I will argue that this total construction of power and identity finds resonance in the colonial project. As alluded to in Franz Fanon's vision of decolonisation, colonialism wholly moulds and creates individuals. The link is established in using gender as a category of historical analysis for empires, where the principal analytical prism is a Foucauldian dispersion of power, in which power emanates through knowledge-fields, discourse and social relations rather than through simple, unmasked, top-down imposition. Two strands emerge: the genealogy of power and the reproduction of power. The former traces how gender has contributed to moulding, naturalising and essentialising colonial hierarchies, while the latter addresses how historical writing itself illuminates or occludes narratives, agencies and subjectivities, in turn creating new meanings. However, gender as a category of historical analysis is useful for historians of empire, contingent upon the adoption of an intersectional approach that does not posit gender as primary to other axes of oppression. Furthermore, the consciousness of its inessentiality – particularly that of the binary – is necessary to avoid perpetuating Eurocentrism and its specific demarcation of the concepts of gender and race.

Gender history was seminally substantiated in Joan Wallach Scott's 1986 work — *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*. Therefore, I will first offer a reconstruction of her work. 3 Expanding from

Scott's typology, I will explore how the gendered lens enabled an understanding of the genealogy of the notion of empire, which concerns the symbolic function of gender. Then, an examination of the role of white women in empires highlights the necessity for an intersectional approach. The necessity for intersectionality is also manifest in studies of the end of empire and national struggles, where gender proves an equally useful but charged category. Some historians trace how women's bodies have often been taken to symbolise national causes such as modernisation and modernity, yet other historians address the inherently complex relationship with racial and political identities. Lastly, I reflect on the role of historical writing itself and its potential for essentialising its objects of criticism: patriarchy, gender binary and European hegemony, therefore positioning historical writing as an act of reproducing power.

Scott proposes that gender is a useful category of historical analysis: she notes a paradigm shift from the mere expansion of subject matter to a 'critical re-examination' of existing historiography. 4 While early gender historians of the 1950s-60s drew their attention to understudied spaces of domestic and labour history, this perpetuated the separation of the spheres of 'sex or politics, family or nation, women or men', reinforcing the 'political' as masculine and 'domestic' as secondary and feminine. 5 Writing has since diverged, as historians theorised of gender in relation to other historical categories through 1960s-1980s, while historians of the 1980s introspectively reevaluated their concept of gender. 6 Scott attempts to synthesise these efforts — for her, 'gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power'. 7 The 'perceived differences' are constituted of 'culturally available symbols', such as the Biblical figures of Eve and Mary; 'normative concepts', such

as educational or religious doctrines; ‘politics... and social institutions and organization’ that stretch beyond kinship systems into the labour force and civil governance; and ‘subjective identity’, the role of socialisation and gender identity. 8 Because of the multifaceted reach of gender, Scott argues that it can serve to illuminate various social relationships and how their dynamics are established. 9 For this essay’s particular focus, the historiography of empire, gender can decode the language of legitimacy in war, conquest and dominance. Finally, Scott asserts the normative aim of this exercise: through this gendered deconstruction of past power structures, ‘open possibilities’ are uncovered for a ‘[utopian] future’ of equality across ‘not only sex but class and race’. 10

In analysing the construction of empire — the genealogy of colonial power — Scott’s symbolic function of gender proves elucidative of the logic which justifies colonial dominance. Philippa Levine recognises that gender analysis does not equate to a universal positioning of gender, but that examining the ‘meaning and effect of sexual difference’ pushes the questions of empire from the descriptive to causal: ones that do not merely narrate but interrogate historical processes. 11 The images of the coloniser and the ‘ideal white male’ converge, imbued with qualities of being ‘physical, responsible, productive, and hard-working’. 12 In the same collection, Kathleen Wilson adopts a Foucauldian lens to uncover the expressions of power beyond the apparent: examining the relationship between gender and the formation and dissemination of other markers of difference and hierarchy under the British empire. In particular, she highlights how ‘stages of civilisation’ — an important scientific and philosophical underpinning of imperial endeavours — were highly dependent on gender in several dimensions. 13 Firstly, the construction of an effeminate native character as antithetical to British masculinity encompassed

sexual promiscuity, irrationality, or timidity, creating a natural distinction between the coloniser and the colonised in conjunction with the racial demarcation. 14 This reflects the intersectionality demanded to make sense of the creation of colonial identities. Mrinalini Sihna explores how these figures of the ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ provided an impetus for colonial projects to assert dominance and self-appoint paternalistic tutelage over economic, political and administrative spheres. 15 Furthermore, Wilson asserts that the position of women was taken as an indicator of civility by ‘Scottish intellectuals, natural historians, and social scientists’ as Scottish historian William Robertson had claimed, ‘To despise and to degrade the female sex, is the characteristic of the savage state in every part of the globe’. 16 Scholars observed the treatment of and the social position of women to draw conclusions on the ‘stage of development’: which as practice of categorisation captured the imagination of imperial scholarship. These acts are laden with irony as they operate with a myopic view of the status of women in their own contexts, reinforcing the understanding of colonial power as embedded in the creation of knowledge. Such criticism thus functions to ahistoricise the notion of civilisation, which has in turn justified empire — acting in a capacity of paternalistic tutelage as non-European societies are considered insufficiently developed along a path that was dictated by European experiences and standards.

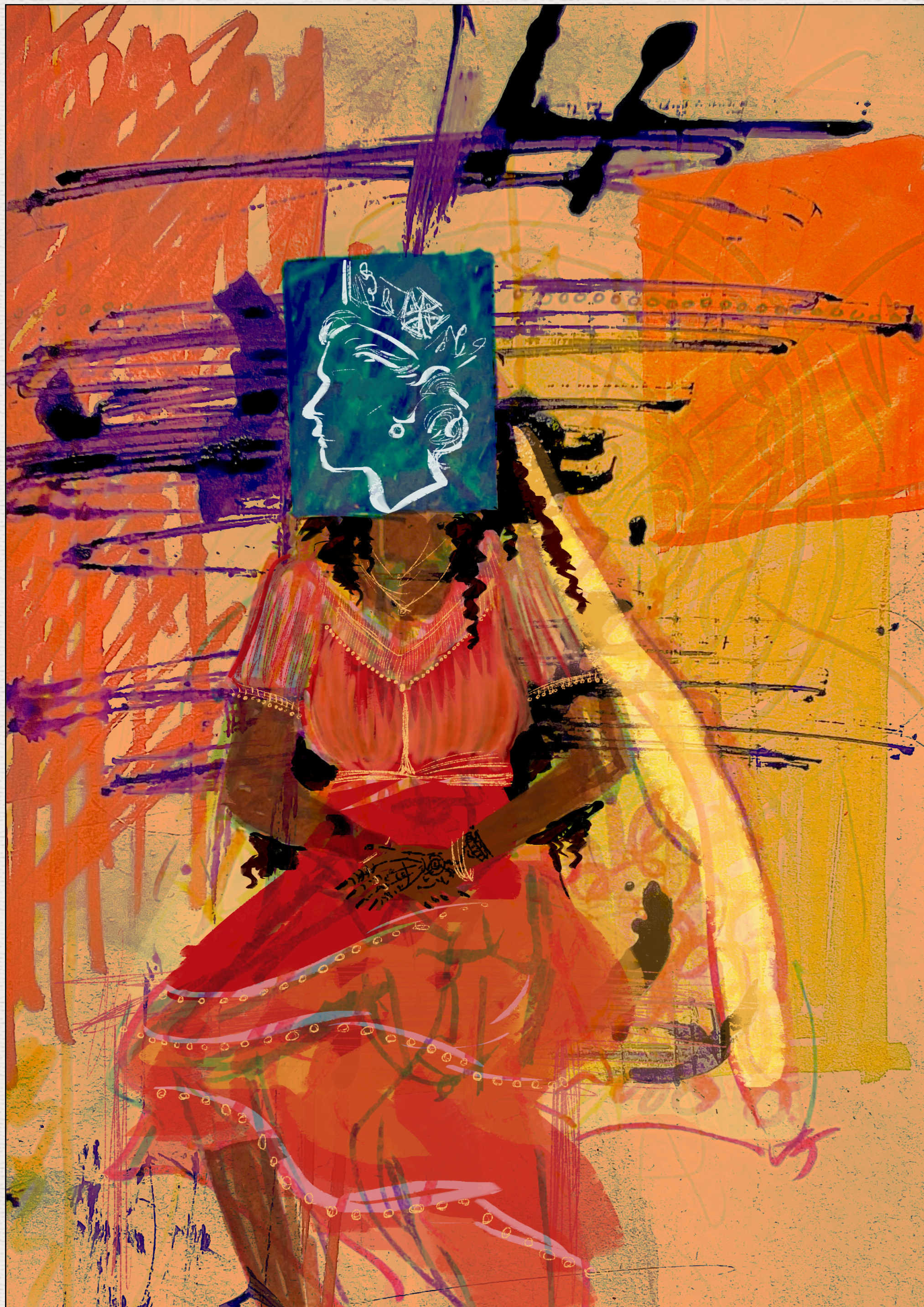
In understanding the motor of empire, however, it is evident that gender alone is insufficient for decoding power dynamics. Some historians attempted to vindicate the historical image of the white woman, challenging the ‘myth of the ignorant, jealous memsahib’ by arguing that this too is a product of patriarchal historical writing — ‘memsahib’ — being how white women of high status were addressed in colonial India. 17

The desire to recognise female agency in reproducing knowledge is understandable, yet Jane Haggis critiques that this ‘risks colonising gender for white women rather than gendering colonialism as a historical process’ when certain lines of inquiry attempt to isolate the experiences of white women.¹⁸ She demonstrates this through her study of missionary women in South India where, although the professionalisation of missionary work appeared as empowerment for Victorian women, as an escape from domesticity, it adhered to patriarchal expectations constructed for both the metropole and the colonies. Haggis offers a measured analysis, avoiding Manichaean labels — that of fundamental and dialectical dualisms — in conversation with her ‘three distinct interests: my subjects - the missionaries; their Indian subjects; and my own purpose: a feminist post-colonial history’.¹⁹ By adopting Edward Said’s conception of the European writer’s situatedness in colonial hierarchies and the creation of the Other, she reveals firstly how missionary women’s self-fashioning as independent and professional hinges on the image of their oppressed Indian ‘sister’.²⁰ Secondly, the missionary woman continues to embody and perpetuate Victorian ideals. Wilson’s discussion of civility can be applied: she was expected to transport with her the domesticity, manners, and Christianity of the English ‘lady’ to the ‘barbarism’ of the colonies.²¹ Oppressive gendered constructs were sustained within the cultures of both the metropole and colony. Thus, historians assessing the operation of empire cannot limit their scope to gender. Haggis has demonstrated the intersectionality demanded, positioning ‘difference [as] a central axis of [her] history’.²²

The process of the dismantling of empire, the national struggle, and its historiography further reveal both the usefulness of gender, as well as the necessity to recognise its social, rather than essential, nature. While the gender binary exists in

many non-Western societies, the fluidity of its implications and identities supports its ultimately social function. Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng examine the evolution of gender and gendered historical writing in China.²³ The ‘woman question’ was a principal concern of Chinese nationalists and communists: Hilary Chung, in analysing the May Fourth Chinese literature, asserted that ‘defiance against the oppression by the modern woman is a beguiling metaphor for revolutionary vocation’.²⁴ These were a part of the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century, often perceived as a watershed in Chinese politics and culture and characterised by its iconoclasm and search for modernity. The subject of female liberalisation has been brought under national projects, signifying the continued objectification of female subjectivity. Rather being an end in itself, Chinese nationalists advocated for female liberation for the teleological ends of ‘modernisation’, as He-Yin Zhen describes the way in which men would proudly present their wives or daughters as Westernised and modernised to reflect their own enlightened status.²⁵ Hershatter and Wang further point out the delayed paradigm shift from writing women into history, to viewing gender as a signifier of power. They attribute this to the dominance of Marxist class analysis, and later, a translational issue — both gender and sex are translated into the same word, *xingbie*. Post-Mao scholars, in the effort to depart from class analysis, essentialised sex in order to ‘precede and transcend’ the former.²⁶ For this reason, analyses of gender as a construct in Chinese cultural and historiographical contexts have been staggered and under-explored. The interactions with political and intellectual climates have significantly altered the efficacy of gender as a category of historical analysis in modern China.

Other histories of the end of empire also wrestle with the weight of nationalism and post-colonialism — consequently, a gendered lens



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cannot be applied in silos without a consciousness of (inter)national power dynamics. Sinha explores how Indian women were only used as a representation of a culture, an embodiment of national sentiment in national struggles. 27 Simultaneously, Lewis and Mills trace the relationships between Western feminists and indigenous women, particularly how Western women campaigned against issues such as 'sati' in India and the veil in Middle Eastern societies. 28 Due to the western nature of this campaigning, these practices were revitalised as 'symbols of resistance to colonial rule, rather than symbols of the oppression of women'. 29 However, this intersectionality renders the conversation complicated, with multiple tensions to be maintained simultaneously. Ania Loomba, Lata Mani and Rajeswari Rajan articulate the difficulty of giving meaning to the 'burning widow of the sati without portraying her as an archetypal victim as Western feminists have, nor as a free agent as is often done in nationalist writings'. 30 As nationalists attempt to reverse the terms and legacies of colonisation, they may also uncritically sustain and glorify practices that are fundamentally harmful and sexist; at the same time, the West's engagement with these topics serve to cultivate its own moral superiority. Neither of these approaches authentically foreground female agency. The deeply contested nature of this topic suggests that gender is not merely posited as constructor of meaning: rather, other categories also mould and decode gendered acts, furthermore, discussions are grounded by their localised contexts. The genealogy of meaning and power appears multidirectional.

Finally, given these ambiguities, historians and feminist theorists have increasingly questioned the role of historical writing as reproduction of power — does this re-examination of past knowledge redistribute or perpetuate power? Two key concerns emerge when using gender as a lens of analysis: its intersection with race as well as the gender binary.

Feminist postcolonial writing, such as that of Audre Lorde and Gayatri Spivak, questions the primacy of gender. Lorde emphasises the power of difference, asserting that feminist writing must question its own racist roots to productively dismantle the interlocked axes of oppression. In her essay *The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, she argues that embracing difference is a powerful reserve for change, in contrast to an unreflective, linear development of feminism. 31 Gender, as evidenced in its pervasiveness in the history of empire, is equally given meaning by its adjacent racist practices. Spivak adopted an innovative rereading of *Jane Eyre* as a colonial novel, exploring how the constructions of literary figures are reliant on the backgrounding of Black characters, drawing conclusions on the formation of white female subjectivity. 32 Barbara Smith articulated that confronting gender alone would never make sense for the oppression of Black women. 33 Gender as a category of historical analysis implies a primacy of gender in constructing meaning, yet this overlooks the construction of gender identities themselves along racial divides. The act of gendered historical analysis itself indicates privilege in adjacent fields of power such as race and class.

Beyond the issue of occluding adjacent axes of oppression, a critique of Scott's approach is that it projects the gender binary onto its subjects of analysis. Despite how her analysis is based on the premise that gender is a social construction, Jeanna Boydston and Afsaneh Najamabadi point out that Scott's social scientific categorisation of gender maintains the binary through the analytical lens of the masculine/feminine dichotomy. 34 Boydston argues that Scott merely deflected 'analysis from the naturalised body to the perceived body, but this was a deflection, not a displacement, for perception now became the real subject'. 35 Colonial projects essentialised hierarchies through the gender binary, however, gendered historical writing essentialises

and reproduces this binary. Therefore, some, particularly non-European, historians have turned their attention away from the binary to make sense of power: by historicising gender as a subject, rather than a category of analysis. For example, Najmabadi examines ‘modes of “male-ness” that were distinct from manhood, but not in reference to womanhood’.³⁶ She explores modes of sexuality in Qatar Iran and reveals how sexual desire between younger and older men was characterised beyond ‘effeminacy’, thus removing the categories of masculinity and femininity altogether.³⁷ On the other hand, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí explores how power was primarily articulated through age and not gender in pre-colonial Yoruba societies, thus deconstructing the assumed relationship between gender and power, or even gender as a salient social identity.³⁸ These examples reveal the risk of applying a gendered lens when confronting colonised societies — it is applying categories that did not exist, and in doing so further colonise the epistemes of pre-colonial histories. However, despite these efforts to uncover native modes of gender, Rey Chow argues that in only accepting the limitations of this quest, will the ‘epistemic violence’ of colonialism be fully confronted through its transformation of native’s consciousness and social constructs.³⁹ An acceptance is not acquiescence; however, it provides an imperative for dismantling of the ontological treatment of the gender binary in historical categorisation, as it links the binary with the colonial knowledge field. The epistemological shift is a productive engagement with the impacts of empire, and therefore how historical writing (re)produce knowledge.

Historical writings of empire demand self-consciousness due to the nature of the construction and maintenance of empire: it is not simply juridical — emanating from the centre to the lower strata, instead it is disciplinary — fluid, productive, and shaped by discourse.⁴⁰

Historians are not mere observers but contributors to this discourse. While gender as a category of historical analysis proves critical in understanding the construction of empires, it could occlude gender production by colonisation and racial demarcation. It is therefore necessary to adopt an intersectional lens of historical analysis, rather than conceptualising of binaries that reproduce power through the act of historical writing. Embracing the complexities allows for an authentic exploration of the reach of colonial power and its historical construction, and, returning to Scott’s closing remarks, an imagination of a future of social and political equality.

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13. Kathleen Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century” in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 16.

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20. Edward W Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983); Haggis, 174.

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22. Haggis, 178.

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33. Lewis and Mills, "Introduction", 5.
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