

INTRODUCTION



It is the winter of 2005, a harrowing time in the history of the United States. The front pages are plastered with images of the continuing brutality and bloodshed of the war in Iraq. The catastrophic hurricanes that pounded the coastline along the Gulf of Mexico have laid waste to a region, gutted a great and beloved city, and exposed governmental inefficiency and flagrant social inequity. Even the Olympus of the American system of government, the Supreme Court, is unsettled. The appointment of two new Justices seems likely to tip the delicate balance of opinions that has held for over a decade. Those who pick up this book are apt to be attentive to patterns of sexual difference in the daily news reports. The headlines suggest that the advances of women into the public sphere heralded by the feminist movement some thirty years ago have stalled. Women hold the office of secretary of state and the governorship of beleaguered Louisiana, but they are still exceptional among political leaders. The president recommended the appointment of a woman to the Supreme Court, but her nomination was withdrawn amid conservative opposition and doubts about her qualifications. The president's second choice was a male and by no means a champion of women's rights. The ranks of soldiers in Iraq have been integrated by sex, but both the occupants of command posts and the rosters of combat fatalities remain overwhelmingly male, testimony to one of the oldest, bluntest, and deadliest examples of the sexual division of labor. Incidentally, the best-selling history books commemorate the lives of politically prominent white men.

Given the perilous condition of the nation and the world at the outset of the twenty-first century, this tabulation of sex ratios may seem a petty distraction. A look beneath the surface of the headlines, however, indicates that further attention to matters of gender is still warranted. Contemporary scholars, many of them a generation or more removed from the high tide of the feminist movement, can point to the mark of gender in each column of newsprint and every electronic image: raw wounds of masculinity and sexuality were on display at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq; the nervous attention to the Supreme Court appointments was focused on a single issue charged with sex and gender, the right to abortion; and fundamental structures of gender, all colored by race, came to the surface with the floodwaters of New Orleans—

represented by the preponderance of single mothers, elderly women, and male prisoners among the displaced. Attention to the fault lines between male and female that reside just beneath the headlines is not a petty distraction; it should be a critical public concern.

Public discussion of questions of sex and gender is not irrelevant as the year 2005 comes to a close, but neither leaders nor journalists have found the will or a way to conduct it. Pressing gender issues seldom make the front page, and when they do it can be less than illuminating. Witness a report on page one of the *New York Times* on the future expectations of female students at Yale University. A small, selective group of elite young women were given a national platform from which to announce their intentions to interrupt careers for full-time mothering, expecting that their future husbands would assume sole financial responsibility for themselves and their children-to-be.¹ Historians, and women and men of a certain age, had heard such forecasts before; they boomed out in the 1950s and have surfaced periodically in newsmagazines and on the best-seller list ever since. The mundane reality that the wages of mothers were vital to the welfare of most American children seemed unworthy of notice. Had the powerful movements for women's rights, gender equity, and sexual freedom initiated but a few decades ago receded this far, leaving only this simplistic and sadly familiar formulation of sex difference—an upscale, updated version of man at work and mother at home? To veteran feminists, this state of affairs is more than exasperating. It poses a painful conundrum: To call attention to “women's issues” too often serves to reinscribe categorical differences between men and women, even to risk regression to the most restrictive dictates of biology—that the female role in reproduction should determine the life course of half of humankind and assign responsibility for the care of the nation's children.

For more than thirty years American scholars have worked tenaciously to foster a critical understanding of the historical differentiation of women from men. It is disappointing, to say the least, to find that all that research and writing has not dislodged the oldest categorical and social boundaries between male and female or moved women closer to the center of American history. The title of this book invites the reader to look again and yet more closely at how male and female appear in the newspapers and the history books, but from a different angle of vision. It asks readers to put aside conventional assumptions about manhood and womanhood and undertake an exploration of the “mysteries of sex.” The chapters to follow do not describe two straightforward and separate tracks of men and women through past time. Rather, they are a tour of the historical record that traces the mys-

tifying process whereby the distinction between male and female is created, adapted, and repeatedly recreated over the course of U.S. history. To illustrate, the second chapter of this book will convert the premise of that *New York Times* article about Ivy League motherhood into an interrogation of the mysterious process whereby American popular culture became so obsessed with feminine domesticity in the first place. It asks, “Who Baked That Apple Pie and When?” and prompts an investigation of family history that commences in the English colonies during the seventeenth century.

The title *Mysteries of Sex* is not intended to be titillating. Quite the contrary, it is simply the most accurate label for the subject of this book. The words “sex” and “mystery” denote the two basic premises of this search through American history. First, after prolonged thrashing through feminist theory, I have come to recognize that the term “sex” best represents the starting point of my investigation. That three-letter word is the signal for the elaborate process of differentiating women and men that will be recounted in these pages. To the extent that the terms “male” and “female” have designated different paths through human history, they have been marked off by reference (however arbitrary or mistaken) to bodies, to those zones of anatomy, desire, and reproduction commonly called sex. Sex is what distinguishes the relation between men and women from other systems of social division and inequality (like race or class) and gives it unique depth, breadth, and power. The erotic aspect of my subject, properly designated by the term “sexuality,” is only one, relatively minor and subordinate element in this overarching system of social differentiation. Yet sex is not an exact, stable, predictable, easily marked, and measured compartment of humanity. American history abounds with multiple, conflicting, ever-mutating meanings attributed to sex. Just how two polarized categories of being have been derived from all the infinite variations in human populations is the overarching and forever unsolved mystery in the history of women and men. The word “mystery” evokes the enigma, contradiction, unpredictability, and treachery that surround this process.

My title also evokes some more optimistic and even playful intentions. The word “mystery” is defined in my dictionary as “anything that arouses curiosity because it is unexplained, inexplicable, or secret.” To investigate the history of a cultural distinction that was left unquestioned for so long, and yet is so fundamentally entangled with the whole fabric of our past, is to undertake an intellectual project that abounds with what Virginia Woolf called the “pleasure of disillusioning.”² For all the seriousness of this enterprise, it is also sparked with something of the fun of a detective story. Tracking down the mysteries of sex, with their mesmerizing twists and turns and stubborn

continuities, can be a hypnotic exercise. In the last, most optimistic analysis, this investigation hopes to see beyond the domain of sexual danger and “gender trouble” to some more pleasing mysteries. Entangled with the relentless mystifications of male and female that will be described in this volume reside those ineluctable joys that reside in our bodies, our sexuality, and the reproduction of our species. My title connotes not just the inequities and iniquities committed in the name of gender, but also these joyful possibilities that lurk amid the mysteries of sex.

Virginia Woolf was among the first to grasp the mystery that was sex. On the eve of the Second World War she saw a historical landscape scarred with the divide between male and female: “chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned in, rigidly, separately, artificially.” Speaking of what she saw as the masculine imagination that patrolled the boundaries of sex, she asked ominously, “Who shall analyze the complexity of a mind that holds so deep a reservoir of time within it?”³ Thirty years later masses of American women and many men took up Woolf’s question. The mysterious powers of sex differences became the object of public attention and feverish debate in the latter half of the twentieth century. The births of the generation to be called baby boomers had been announced with the confident proclamation: “it’s a boy,” or “it’s a girl.” But over the next generation, these verities, these seemingly obvious and universal assumptions about the division of humankind, were called into question, as well they should be. Why should the course of each human life be channeled at its very outset, without hesitation or questioning, along one of two different tracks through a lifetime? Did it not restrict the freedom and individuality of each child and create a border along which conflict and inequity might grow?

Signs of doubt about the division between male and female appeared on the banner of the women’s liberation movement late in the 1960s, just as the baby boomers were coming of age. Within a decade, assertions of gender equality and sexual freedom displaced the old domestic tableau—mom and dad, boy and girl—from television shows and census reports alike. Some perspicacious observers were quick to grasp the challenge to the old order of male and female. In her novel of 1977, Angela Carter put readers through a harrowing set of sex changes that left her central character, “The New Eve,” in a state of profound anomie: “Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that—the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female . . . that I do not know. Although I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer

to these questions. Still they bewilder me. I have not reached the end of the maze yet.”⁴

The mystery of sex captured many imaginations and tapped immense creativity in the time of the New Eve. Radical challenges to the fundamental cultural divide between male and female became almost commonplace. Spearheaded by a new women’s movement, the break with the orthodoxy of sex created provocative works of fiction like the novels of Carter or Gore Vidal, iconoclastic theories about “female eunuchs” and the “dialectics of sex,” proposals for test-tube babies and socialized child care, and such popular icons as cross-dressing rock stars and unisex fashions. These transfigurations of male and female were not just passing fads. A quarter century later they had evolved into a whole repertoire of bending and blending male and female identities—on stage, on the streets, and potentially, in the test tubes. Who, for example, would have anticipated this television transmission at the turn of the millennium? A female reporter in a business suit interviewed a celebrant of Gay Pride Day in San Francisco. This elegantly cross-dressed member of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence made no pretense of masquerading as the “opposite sex”: in what seems to be a local fashion, he/she sported a full beard beneath his/her immaculate eye makeup and somewhat less fastidious hairdo. Such blasé expressions of the plasticity, artificiality, and ambiguity of sex challenged the simple assumptions of the past, like “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl.” Granted, the streets of San Francisco were not Main Street U.S.A., where past conventions of masculinity and femininity still found many zealous adherents and concerted political support. Yet the stridency of the reaction against challenges to the traditional divide between the sexes first heard in the 1970s indicates that the meaning of male and female has not reverted to the old orthodoxy. The glossary of sex has now expanded to include such neologisms as “transgender,” “gender outlaws,” “virtual gender,” “non-gendered sex,” and “cyber sex.”⁵

Even the staid custodians of the national past became caught up in a new wave of feminist consciousness in the 1970s and created, almost overnight, a whole new field of study named Women’s History. In the relative quiet and privilege of feminist meetings and university classrooms, we conducted a more genteel sex change: the personages of history were transformed from generic males into women and men. I consider it my great good fortune to have joined in the exhilarating consciousness of that moment in history. In 1972, my newly minted Ph.D. in hand, I contracted to write a book entitled “A Feminist History of the United States.” This project was conceived in youthful audacity heightened by the heady political possibilities of that time: it

presumed to piece together a coherent history out of some frantic primary research combined with the sparse, but rapidly growing, secondary studies of women's past. The resulting book, its title chastened to simply *Womanhood in America*, appeared in 1975. My project was relatively tame, and my goal was recited in academic prose:

The aim of this volume is to describe the making of the social and cultural category, womanhood, the artificial mold into which history has persistently shaped the female sex. This investigation is inspired by the vexing question, what is woman? and is rooted in the belief that history has invested her with a distinctive personality that greatly exaggerates and consistently distorts her simple biological characteristics. An examination of the sundry definitions of woman that have paraded through the American past will expose the destructive impositions of culture and society upon the second sex, and thus clear away the refuse of mystique that has surrounded and suppressed the human female.⁶

Those intentions were at once too grandiose and too timid. To dare to write a history of women thirty years ago seemed like a leap onto a vacant frontier; it was in fact part of a mass landing of scholars and activists that conquered academic beachheads like the history profession with relatively little effective opposition. The knowledge about the female subjects of history that began to collect haphazardly twenty-five years ago has now mounted to impressive heights. Where teachers and students of the 1970s were angered and bewildered by the neglect of female subjects in history, today's readers will encounter a mass of information about women's lives in the past that is daunting in its volume, complexity, and respectability. Simply to update my first book, undertaken as a utopian project thirty years ago, would be a conservative exercise in the twenty-first century. Moreover, this body of historical writing is no longer contained within a field called Women's History. A generation ago, men were the generic subjects of most all history books. Now they have followed women into a heightened consciousness of sex: they have been named as male and invested with the attributes of masculinity. (There is still a lot of catching up to do on the male side of American historiography, however, which accounts for some of the imbalance in the chapters that follow.) A new orthodoxy now spans across the humanities and the social sciences and acknowledges the artificiality and plasticity of the divide between the sexes with the ubiquitous use of the term "gender."

The widespread acceptance of the notion of gender is the punctuation point in a major historical transition; it marks the culmination of an intel-

lectual adventure for my generation of historians and a major revision in the meaning of male and female for my students. What we vaguely recall as the “women’s movement” of the late 1960s turns out to have only dimly prefigured extraordinary changes in how women and men, mothers and fathers, and students of both genders conduct their lives. Forty years ago housewife was still the modal occupation for the female sex, the learned professions of law and medicine were virtually male preserves, and the notion of gay marriage was unimaginable. Over the last three decades the inherited meanings of male and female have become the sites of pitched political battles and unrelenting change, especially for American women, who now enroll in the paid labor force in numbers almost equal to men and have broken sundry barriers of gender, in both private and public life, from levels of extramarital sexuality to candidacy for the presidency. After living this turbulent history, all the while trying to keep abreast of the voluminous scholarship in women’s and gender studies, I feel compelled to try once again to bring the accumulated scholarship into focus with the intellectual and political needs of the present.

My first reflex was to update *Womanhood in America* by incorporating this rich recent literature and rename the book “Gender in America.” I ultimately rejected this strategy and therefore must confess at the outset all the things that this book is not. First of all, this is not a textbook. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive recitation of the factual history of men and women in America. I have not set out on an impossible quest to represent the history of women (and/or men) in all its variations by region, religion, age, class, race, ethnicity, and so forth. Neither is this volume a historiographical exercise: It does not present and adjudicate the debates among historians about this vast subject. These projects are difficult and essential acts of scholarship, and thankfully, other historians have done much to accomplish them.⁸ I am more deeply indebted to the many colleagues who have created the fields of women’s and gender history than hundreds of footnotes can ever acknowledge. This book is a conversation with their ideas and interpretations; every page is dependent upon the prodigious research of others. The wealth and sophistication of this scholarship should place it at center stage in American historiography.

While I hope my readers will taste the excitement of this recent scholarship and sense the wide sweep of women’s and gender history, this book is driven by some other intellectual and political imperatives. Thirty years after the publication of *Womanhood in America*, and despite the accumulation of mountains of knowledge about its subject matter, I find the phenomenon called gender more perplexing and mysterious than ever. Hence this book is

animated by my own citizen's concern and historian's fascination about the "mysteries of sex." As the reader has already detected, I am not a disinterested party to this history and would not disguise my feminist intentions or suppress my idiosyncratic personal perspective. (You will also detect that I am both angry about the crimes committed in the name of gender and optimistic that the sexes can live happily together.) For me, the political and intellectual urgency of women's history as it emerged over thirty years ago has not subsided. The discoveries and discontents that first inspired what is now a rather sedate academic field have not been put to rest. Arbitrary gender differences are still extant and still exhaust a price of injustice and personal pain (for women and men and for the significant number of people who reject both categories). This is the first reason that I have chosen to pose the chapters to follow not as a cut-and-dried report on gender in American history, but as part of a continuous engagement with the mystifications of sex differentiation, past and present. The political vigilance about matters of sex and gender initiated by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s had clearly grown lax by the close of the twentieth century and was marginalized by the national and international crises of the twenty-first, but it is needed as much or more than ever.

The battle of the sexes still goes on in popular culture and is still too often conducted in the language of fairy tales and psychobabble (for example, the assertion that "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus"). As late as 2005 the president of Harvard University publicly espoused a naive biological explanation for the underrepresentation of women among scientists, blatantly ignorant of the research of his own faculty, not to speak of the extraordinary influx of women into fields from physics to medicine and computer science. (In each of these fields the proportion of women doctorates has increased at least fivefold over the last thirty years. Among biologists the percentage of women increased to almost 44 percent.)⁹ Clearly the knowledge of sex, gender, and women's history so painstakingly produced since the 1970s still needs to be consolidated and circulated. Until we learn to walk more cautiously and wisely through the minefield of masculinity and femininity, we will find it poisoning our public, as well as private, lives. If unexamined, or taken as the obvious rather than as a mystery needing an explanation, sex becomes a public menace. Witness its apparition in the 1990s as a piteous monstrosity that began as sex play in the White House and ended as a congressional impeachment trial, or the influence of opposition to same-sex marriage on the outcome of the presidential election of 2004.

American history is stocked full of the mischief done in the name of the

division between the sexes. Some of the conundrums of gender difference are small puzzles, like why do Americans color the sexes pink or blue? The little anomalies mount to bigger questions: Why did modern western politics pay so much heed to a gendered distinction between public and private? Why do so many societies invest so heavily in patrolling and prescribing lifelong heterosexual pairings? Small or colossal, the mystifications of male and female have come together for millennia to create a tedious dualism out of the wealth of human possibilities. This is one of the most excruciating enigmas of maleness and femaleness. Its painful everyday consequences assaulted Jan Morris, who, taking advantage of modern medicine, changed her sex from male to female. During the period when Morris made the transition, she found it easy to step out of her male persona and into a female one, even within the few minutes it took to move from a venue where she was known as a man to where she was taken for a woman. But to her surprise, Jan Morris found that she could not evade the differences that gender made and the demotion that came with woman's status: "No aspect of existence, no moment of the day, no contact, no arrangement, no response, which is not different for men and for women. . . . Men treated me more and more as a junior. . . . and so, addressed every day of my life as an inferior, involuntarily, month by month I accepted the condition."¹⁰ This report does not suggest that the time has come to stop questioning the mystifying process that divides male from female. Neither can the insistent and bruising ways that men and women are divided from one another be simply assuaged by recitations of the new orthodoxy: that gender is a fiction, ever in the process of reconstruction. In the twenty-first century, even after a generation of radical challenges to gender orthodoxy, history seems to be reverting to the tired, stubborn dualism of male and female. To me, it remains imperative to confront the difference of sex squarely, in all its mystery and its potency.

This peculiar point of entry into the history of women and men accounts for the slightly unorthodox structure and chronology of this book. Each of the chapters to follow subordinates conventional notions of historical period and subject matter to what I pose as key mysteries of sex, all arranged in a rough chronology that spans the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Each chapter poses a mystery with at least two dimensions, both a puzzle of gender difference and an unresolved problem in American history. Chapter 1, for example, first uses the evidence of pre-Columbian Indian tribes to interrogate the mysterious historical tenacity, some say universality, of male dominance. Then, in pursuit of the question "Where Have the Corn Mothers Gone," it puts this history of gender in play in order to help explain the outcome of the

collision between Amerindian cultures and European colonizers. Six more chapters follow, culminating in an account of the gender history of the last half century when the confluence of social movements, economic transformations, and massive immigration set the stage for the most momentous mystery of sex: whether gender differences can wither away or at least be reduced in significance and disarmed of inequity and oppression.

The investigations to follow are not comprehensive historical accounts. Rather, they make strategic and selective use of the evidence available in order to solve some specific mysteries of sex. In hopes of discovering the origins of feminine domesticity, for example, chapter 2 focuses on the rich body of evidence found in the early history of Protestant New England. In pursuit of the intersection of gender and race, chapter 3 narrows in on the southern United States and the history of African Americans. (Other groups who have been categorized as races, including eastern and southern Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans, appear in a chapter on immigration.) A chapter devoted to “How Do You Get from Home to Work to Equity” in the twentieth century is constructed around census data that separates “white” from “non-white.” Nonetheless, this record of expanding occupational opportunities reveals that differences in age and generation may be the chief suspects in this particular mystery. The young women who laid siege to the labor force early in the last century, among them Jewish garment workers, Greenwich Village bohemians, and blues singers in Harlem, did much to solve this mystery and did so in the vivacious spirit of their fictional peer, Nancy Drew, detective.

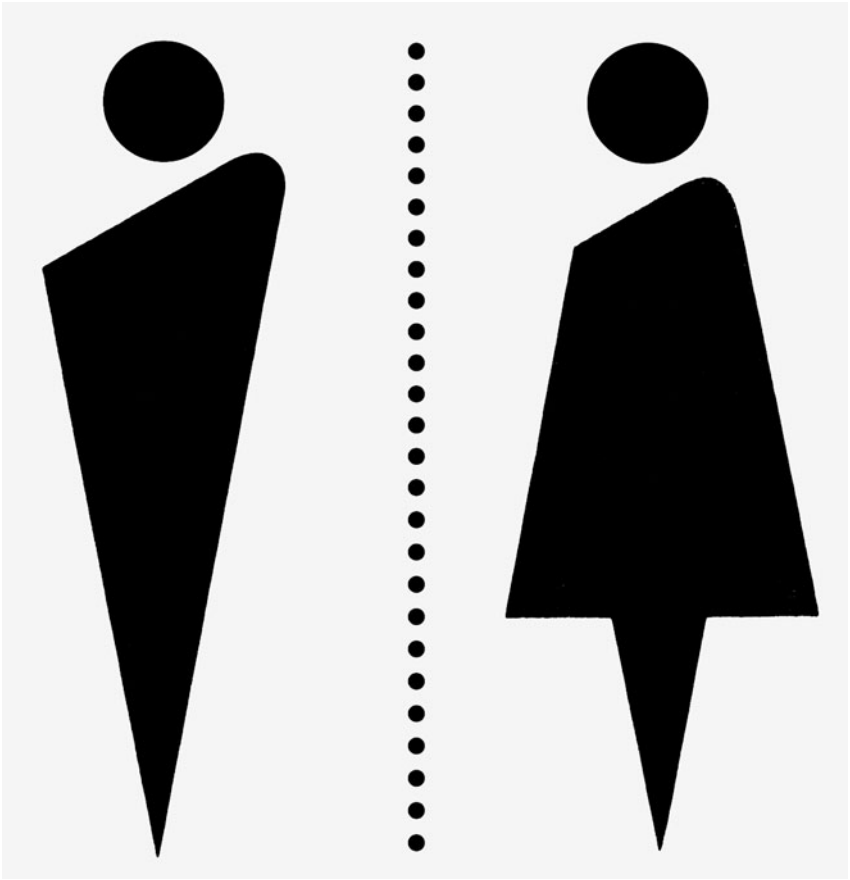
My course through this vast historical landscape has been guided by a few simple concepts, of which I will apprise the reader as expeditiously as possible. While I have relegated questions of epistemology to the background, this historical investigation does take off from academic understandings of gender, which at the simplest level recognize that “woman” and “man” are social and cultural constructions, bearing a complex, in no way causal, relation to biological sex.¹¹ The distinction between sex and gender is indispensable and will be used throughout this book. The term “sex” designates a biological classification of “male” and “female,” while the concept of gender refers to the social and cultural process that distinguishes “men” from “women” in any historical moment.¹² But that is not the whole of it. For almost three decades academic feminists have subjected this first premise of gender analysis to systematic, intense, and sometimes hairsplitting scrutiny. Sex is no longer seen as a physical or genital bedrock of male and female on which the gender identities of men and women are founded. Sex itself is “always already” gendered; it is a categorical supposition that is itself embedded in

a deeply gendered human culture. Feminist philosophers vest gender not in physiological difference but in immaterial, albeit powerful, processes like language, the unconscious, and the creation of meaning through quotidian action. Those feminist theorists who regard the differentiation of men from women as a consequence of practice or performance—"the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders" in the words of Judith Butler—are particularly useful to historians who seek to place the thought and action of women and men at the center of past events.¹³

In step with the march of feminist theory, prosaic evidence continues to pour in describing the variety and vagaries of gender, much of it voiced by marginal social groups, especially racial and sexual minorities. Patterns of manhood and womanhood are too various, too perversely contradictory, to conform to a single, universal model. Finally, often prompted by awareness of differences in erotic practices and ambiguous sexual identities, the duality of gender came under suspicion. If womanhood and manhood were so weakly anchored in either philosophy or empirical evidence, why divide humanity so bluntly into two sexes in the first place? Why not speak of one, three, none, or an infinite number of genders? In rapid succession both rubrics for dividing up the human species, gender as well as sex, seemed to topple off their ontological foundations. On the simple level of taxonomy, the move from woman to gender was complete before 1980 and operated thereafter as a powerful skepticism, progressively undermining any attribution of universal meaning to the outcome of sexual differentiation, the labels male and female, the identities of men and women.

These epistemological nuances offer essential but insufficient guidance through the long, convoluted course of women and men through history. The notion of "doing gender" enunciated by Candace West, Don Zimmerman, and Sarah Fenstermaker provides the critical step onto the stage of social history. These sociologists plot the creation of men and women as a "routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" done by individuals "in one sense. . . . But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others."¹⁴ Gender is something "one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others."¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu put it in more punishing terms when he called the practice of gender an "unremitting discipline."¹⁶ I illustrate this principle to my students with the crudest of examples: We do gender every time we read some abstract symbols on doorways and then divide up in two different lines at the restroom. In sum, sex has been thoroughly demystified in the realm of theory, reduced to an everyday social practice.

But once the suspect ontology of sex has been acknowledged and scruti-



Restroom sign, Yerba Buena Center, San Francisco.

nized so exhaustively, the historian's task has hardly begun. However shaky the philosophical grounds, cultures persist in sorting out the complexity of humankind into two sexes. In defiance of both rigorous logic and the wonderful diversity of the human species, we repeatedly draw blunt lines to distinguish things male from things female. This book aggregates all sorts of these distinctions together, in their variety and perversity. In so doing, I do not intend to define what gender is, or is not, but to describe the immense amount of history that has been made in its name. This book, in other words, is not driven by a quest to know what is male or female, man or woman; it will not solve the mystery of sex. It asks instead, "What has that complicated and ever-recurring process of dividing humanity according to sex done in the world and over time?" Phrased another way, this book investigates some of those multifarious and mysterious historical deeds that produce the distinc-

tion called sex. As Howard Winant has aptly put it, gender, like race, “has a formidable inertia, a historical weight, which is crystallized in innumerable institutions, customs, and laws. It has been engraved in time and space, made into a truly ‘deep structure.’”¹⁷ Again, Pierre Bourdieu puts the mysterious and divisive power of sex most ominously: it is “exercised in very different scales, in all social spaces.” It has “gone on permanently, so long as there have been men and women, and through which the masculine order has been continuously reproduced from age to age.”¹⁸

Tracking down how sex differences operated just within the territory of the contemporary United States over the last half millennium is a preposterously tall order. After more than thirty years of trying to guide my students through the morass of trivial facts and universalistic pronouncements about men and women in history, I have found a few tools especially helpful in identifying those “deep structures” to which Winant refers. My first strategic simplification has been to sort the infinite details of everyday gender practice along three empirical coordinates — three axes along which gender operates and the sexes divide. Compiled from historical accounts and reworked according to the conceptual wisdom of social science, my operative categories of analysis are gender asymmetry, the relations of the sexes, and gender hierarchy.

The first of these, asymmetry, simply directs attention to how gender does its most familiar work, careening through society, dividing things male from things female, and creating two worlds of meaning that do not line up flush with one another. In Amerindian societies five hundred years ago, gender asymmetry was acted out by the women who planted corn while the men trapped beaver, and it is just as unmistakable along the aisles of a toy store today, where boys and girls part at the border between pink and fuchsia Barbie costumes and olive-drab plastic soldiers. My second axis of analysis focuses on the culturally sanctioned ways of relating the sexes to one another. Typified and idealized in most of American history as the nuclear family, the relations of the sexes are also easily discernible, but quite variable, from the matrifocal clans of Algonquians in the sixteenth century to the small, volatile household groupings that occupy their hunting grounds in suburban Virginia today. Tracing the third axis of gender, the hierarchical ranking of male and female, will take the reader along another meandering course, from sightings of tribal chiefs, some of them women, to a succession of forty-four male presidents of these United States. Gender hierarchy is visible on many vertical scales: it dispenses authority, honor, and material rewards in unequal portions; and up until now it has tended to cluster men at the top and women below.

While gender difference, in all three dimensions, seems remarkably stubborn over long stretches of time, the exact and specific meanings attributed to male and female are highly variable, or at least capable of running a considerable gamut, from the Indian women who first domesticated corn to the genetic engineers, more likely male, who design postmodern food products. This combination of the persistence of gender coding and the variability in actual practice presents the great conundrum of gender. It provokes an awe-struck “why?” and requires that the story move beyond simple description to a world of action, of plot, of mysteries begging solution.

The description of gender is only deep background to a second objective of this book: to project the mystification and mystery of sex across time and into American history. The subjects of sex, gender, male, and female are latecomers to historical study and have seldom been subjected to the historian’s battery of questions about sequence, causes, periodization, human motivation, and efficacy. Sexual differentiation is, however, clearly a historical process enacted in time and by men and women. As such, it is particularly amenable to recent social theories that employ terms like “structuration,” “practice,” or “habitus” to recognize human agency and acknowledge that society is ever in the making. In specific historical circumstances, men and women find ways to alter traditions, individualize institutions, and on occasion, especially when they act collectively, set social changes in motion. The anthropologist Sherry Ortner has theorized gender practice as a kind of “serious game.” Like ordinary game-playing, the construction of male and female takes place in a universe of rules that clearly circumscribes and limits human freedom. But as players—active participants in the game—men and women can manipulate, stretch, and disobey the rules and occasionally exploit opportunities to change them. From the subaltern position in which women have most often played the serious game of gender, they are, as Ortner puts it, “constructed by their own culture and history and . . . in turn re-make their culture and history.” Taking her cue from Marshall Sahlins’s concept of historical conjuncture, Ortner also identifies a second plane of participation in the making of gender. In moments when a society and its gender culture become unstable—be it due to natural calamity, external forces, or an unprecedented convergence of events—the rules of the whole game, along with the authority that enforces the rules, can be toppled and replaced.¹⁹

Changes of this magnitude drive this investigation of the mysteries of sex through American history and inform the tripartite organization of this book. Coursing beneath the surface of the chapters that follow is a larger narrative of how sex has been made and unmade over the long haul of Ameri-

can history. The drama commences at a moment of historical conjuncture when one integral set of gender practices superseded another. This apocalyptic moment in gender history occurred when Europeans intruded into North America and introduced the changes that would unravel the intricate tribal cultures that Native Americans had finely stitched together around the roles of male warrior-hunters and female cultivator-gatherers. The wide arc of gender history that commenced from this point resulted in the construction of a modern gender regime distinctive to the United States and gives Part I its grandiose title and extended chronology, "Making Sex in America: 1500–1900." This story spans three chapters, ranges over New England and the slave South, crosses the centuries, and culminates in a particularly sharp and ideologically powerful distinction between male and female, man and woman. This way of dividing the world by sex, whose commonest emblems were "separate spheres" of feminine domesticity and male breadwinning, also made a durable mark on the American political tradition, the theme of Part II.

Consisting of only one chapter, Part II, entitled "Dividing the Public Realm," examines gender in the American political tradition between the Revolution and the New Deal and is a vital hinge of this book. First, it charts how the sharp divide between the sexes that had grown up in modern America was installed at the foundation of the American political tradition between the Revolution and the Civil War. Then it proceeds to show how the gender division between public and private life came apart at the seams of its internal contradictions. American political institutions were built along that modern divide between male and female, which turned out to be a precarious foundation. Denied entry into the formal public sphere, American women created a political domain of their own, a separate world of philanthropy and reform, which by the twentieth century had become powerful enough to undermine the sexual divide that had been the defining feature of modern American gender.

Part III extends through the whole of the twentieth century, as it describes the progressive coming apart of modern gender. By the year 2000 the border between male and female had become frayed on all sides, in the family, the workforce, the public sphere, and (with successive waves of immigrants) at the borders of the nation itself. Human agency comes to the foreground during this denouement of modern gender, acted out with special vigor by women, be they new entrants into the labor force or feminists at the barricades. The end of Part III finds the modern ways of differentiating male from female dethroned and demystified. Yet the contemporary arrangement

of the sexes is still amorphous and defies any label more illuminating than the anemic term “postmodern.” Just what might replace the old American way of doing gender remains a mystery, and hence a hope that in the future humanity will not be so egregiously divided by something called sex.

The historical meanings of gender are not exhausted once male and female have been named, mapped, and related to one another. As practice and as symbol, gender powerfully effects a wide set of other social, cultural, economic, and political processes—historical domains to which it would seem to have no intrinsic connection. This power of gender to influence events is repeatedly demonstrated in the pages that follow. For example, misunderstanding about the proper roles of men and women poisoned the first encounters between Europeans and American Indians and weighed heavily in the outcome; concerns specific to young single men late in the eighteenth century helped to propel a war of independence from Great Britain; relations in the bedroom and drawing room gave shape to the class differences of that historical period called “Victorian”; women’s clubs drafted public policies that helped to sculpt the modern state in the Progressive Era. More generally, the distinction between male and female has served repeatedly as a way of marking the boundaries between social groups—tribes, regions, classes, races, and nations. Erotic relations (or prohibitions thereof) repeatedly serve as the symbolic and structural materials with which to erect cultural boundaries and draw tense lines between enemy and ally, belligerence and cooperation. Michel Foucault distilled this potent form of gender practice in an aphorism: “Sexuality is a major transfer point in the relations of power.”²⁰ The most anguished social division in the history of the United States is found at the border between those groups that came to be known as races. The mystification of sex therefore will repeatedly be found haunting the history of race in America, from the origins of slavery to the constitution of citizenship. The difference of sex was complicit in all the archetypal events of American history, not just the celebrated high points like the Revolution and the Progressive Era, but also at moments of national shame such as the colonial witch hunts, the enslavement of Africans, and xenophobia against the foreign-born.

The last chapter of *Mysteries of Sex* reviews the subject of immigration from 1900 to the present. This book ends as it began, at a historical moment when different gender cultures converged on the North American continent. The most recent chapter in the global history of gender occurs at a time when the relations of men and women are being organized on an international scale and by a corporate culture that can distribute laboring families around the world and transmit cartoonlike images of male and female onto video

screens far and wide. It is prudent to remain on the alert for new mystifications of male and female that may unfold in the twenty-first century. Yet it can also be argued that the restructuring of gender in our time has made the divide of sex less polarized and less salient than in any time in history. The volatility of the meaning of female and male over the last generation is what makes the consciousness of gender found in a book like this possible in the first place.

The repetitive pattern of gender differentiation to be described in the chapters to follow was shaped, enacted, and at times thwarted by ordinary men and women. Almost every one of the countless individuals who made American history accepted the identity of either male or female, but none of them lost their human agency in the process. The architects of gender history have many representatives in these pages. The Clan Mothers of the Seneca tribe shouted a refusal to surrender their native lands to either chiefs or Indian agents. Educated Victorian women—the spinster Catharine Beecher, the widowed Sarah Josepha Hale, the married Lydia Maria Child—devised a domestic ideology that provided them economic independence and political influence. A citizen of New York by the name of Murray Hall relished all the privileges of masculinity—exercising the vote, visiting the tavern, pursuing women—until he died of breast cancer in a woman’s body. Tough-minded but care-taking leaders of the Progressive Era like Jane Addams issued some pointed reprimands to those who would dismantle the welfare state. Demands for racial justice made by Ida B. Wells in the 1890s echoed through a century of protest led by proud “colored women.” Young immigrant voices—from authors like Anzia Yezierska and Abraham Cahan in the 1920s to anonymous undocumented workers and cosmopolitan novelists today—speak with many tongues and particular eloquence about the malleability, as well as the menace, of gender in America. Such polyphonic personal testimony also raises the possibility that, in time, the differences of sex might play out more sonorously, like the intrigue, excitement, and pleasure of a good mystery.