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# On 'The evidence of experience' and its reverberations: An interview with Joan W. Scott

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## Introduction

In 2012, following the 'Experience, Echo, Event' symposium held at Stony Brook University to critically reflect on the theoretical and methodological provocations – for both feminist history *and* theory – of Joan Scott's essay, 'The Evidence of Experience', we conducted an interview with Scott over email. We intended the interview to be a dialogic space for thinking through the guiding premise of this special issue: namely, that the viability and legibility of both fields – feminist history and feminist theory – depend on a critically reflexive relation between them. Joan W. Scott's work, for us, offers a model for such critical reflection, and we wanted to provide a space for her to discuss the development of her thought since 'The Evidence of Experience' was first published in 1991. As Scott notes in the interview, it was her extensive engagements with feminist philosophers and literary scholars in the Pembroke Center seminars for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University in the early 1980s that set her on a restless search for 'ways of reading' the past that would also make the historian's mode of thinking an object of inquiry. History demands that we locate theory in its moment and through its mode of address, while theory, Scott reminds us, helps us to understand the relationship between the past and present as a problem to be encountered and explored but never, finally, something to know once and for all.

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## The moment of emergence – Around 1991

**Victoria Hesford and Lisa Diedrich:** Looking back, the late 1980s and early 1990s seems to have been a very exciting time in feminist thought, and the Institute for Advanced Study seems to have been one of the centres for feminist thought in the US academy at that time. In 1988, Denise Riley publishes *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of Women in History*, and in her acknowledgements, Riley mentions a Pembroke Center postdoctoral fellowship in 1984–1985 and a research assistantship in 1986–1987 at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. In 1990, Judith Butler publishes *Gender Trouble*, and in her essay, ‘Speaking Up, Talking Back: Joan Scott’s Critical Feminism’, she notes, ‘I wrote *Gender Trouble* in the late 1980s in large part at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton where, at Scott’s invitation, I spent a year in the company of several interesting scholars who were working on the theme of gender’ (Butler, 2011: 20). Other important publications from this particular moment, include: Donna Haraway’s *Primate Visions* (1989) and *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990), and your own, *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988).

We wondered if you could talk about what led to the essay’s arising, and more generally about the historical conditions of your becoming what we might call, somewhat reductively and too cleanly perhaps, a feminist theorist (as distinct from your already established identity as a historian)? What was happening at the time you were working on the essay? What were you thinking, feeling, doing at that time? How were you influenced (or not) by this larger conversation?

In relation: how would you situate your work in the early 1990s within the larger field of feminist history – what kinds of disciplinary trends and transitions were happening at the time that you sought to build upon or contest in your own work?

**Joan W. Scott:** This question has too many parts to answer all at once.

Yes, the 1990s were an exciting time for feminist theorising, though I wouldn’t say the Institute for Advanced Study was an especially influential place. My own ‘formation’ as a feminist theorist was at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University, a centre I founded with Elizabeth Weed in 1981. It was at the Pembroke Center that I came in contact with an amazing group of feminists, most of them in literature – Naomi Schor, Ellen Rooney, Mary Ann Doane and (in science) Anne Fausto-Sterling. In the Pembroke seminars, we brought in postdocs who have since also become ‘names’ in their fields (Denise Riley, Anne Norton, Kaja Silverman, and Afsaneh Najmabadi among them). It was in those seminars that I absorbed poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory. When I arrived at the Institute in 1985, I brought those ideas and questions with me. The first seminar I ran in 1987–88 was on the theme of gender. We had an interesting and contentious group – Judith Butler and Donna Haraway were among them – and I’m sure lots of good work came out of that too, but for me the Pembroke Center was the crucible for my kind of feminist theorising, as it has been for many others in

its thirty years of existence. It was there that I became a party to the larger conversations you refer to, one that included Gayatri Spivak, Eve Sedgwick and many others whose work came to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

My paper on 'Experience' was influenced by what I had been reading in the Pembroke seminar. It was written in direct response to an article in the *American Historical Review* by an intellectual historian called John Toews (1987). My article embodied my growing impatience with my fellow social historians who assumed that experience was transparent, that there was a direct relationship between, say, economic circumstances and political action, that there was no need to ask what counted as experience – we could know what that was from a sociological description of the conditions of life of groups and individuals. The telling point in Toews' article was the absence of any definition of the term experience – he assumed we all knew what it meant. My readings of Foucault, Derrida, Freud, Lacan, Irigaray and others had led me to doubt that words like experience were self-evident; the point was to ask what kind of work they were doing, how they were establishing meaning, how some things and not others came to be included in the term. When 'experience' was alluded to by historians what did they mean by the term? What were they including and excluding? How were they measuring the impact of 'experience' on the psyches of individuals? How did an appeal to a common experience create a sense of membership in a group? These were the kinds of questions that seemed to me to be left aside when the meaning of experience was taken to be known by historians.

In a way, my article on 'Experience' was a continuation of the line of thinking I began in 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' (written in 1985–86). Like 'Experience', that was a conversation both with feminists in other disciplines and with my colleagues in history. The point was to use the theory I was learning to engage critically with my own discipline. It had long been said that feminist history wasn't simply about adding women to the body of knowledge we call history, but was about critically engaging that history so as to change not just its contents, but its questions and conceptualisations. I took that as the kind of feminist political work I wanted to do within the discipline.

## Categories of thought

**VH and LD:** Your work is often labelled 'poststructuralist'. In the same essay mentioned above, Judith Butler explains that, 'the commitment to coming up with a critical feminism clearly bound us together in a common project, one that we understood at the time to require and to specify poststructuralism' (2011: 21). Do you still use this term for your work? How do you categorise your own work? Or, more generally, how do you place your work conceptually?

**JWS:** I still think of my work as poststructuralist and by that I mean that I am committed to deconstructing the organising concepts with which I work and which I study, to analysing the intricacies of the language used by historical actors and historians (myself included), to interrogating that language through a

psychoanalytic lens when possible, and to understanding something of the complex relationship between history and language. Attention to language doesn't exclude consideration of structural matters – economic, social, political formations – but it does assume that these don't stand outside of their conceptual articulation. And it assumes as well that there's a great deal of insight to be gained from locating contradictions (and attempts to override, ignore or suppress them) in the discourses that bring capitalism, nationalism, gender, and other systems into being.

### Historicising categories

**VH and LD:** Denise Riley's work, and particularly, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (1988), has played an influential role in your own work, and her call in that book to write histories of categories seems to resonate widely today – from David Valentine's anthropological, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007) to Tani Barlow's, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (2004). Why is it important, in your view, to write histories of categories, or would you put it differently?

**JWS:** No, I wouldn't put it differently. It's Foucault who best formulated this genealogical approach, arguing that 'events' were not things that happened, but conceptual changes that altered the mindset of a culture or society or group. If you believe that how we think about things is how we know them, then it is our categories of thought that create knowledge. It then becomes very important to know where those categories come from, how they have been used and by whom, what they permit us to think and what they rule out of consideration. So, for example, you cite David Valentine's work (2007) that examines how a new category – that of the transgendered individual – comes into being, what it allows us to know that we couldn't have possibly known before, how it permits subject identities to form, to be studied, regulated, and organised. The history of categories, critically interrogated, is, for me, the best kind of history to write.

### Readings and (mis-)readings

**VH and LD:** In a conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir noted that she became a feminist when other women read her work (from the film *Simone de Beauvoir*, 1978). Clearly, Beauvoir's work is taken up at a different historical conjuncture, but we wonder whether you have been surprised by the way your work has been taken up (or not) in various domains: feminist theory, history, etc.?

**JWS:** To answer this part of the question first, I'll say that I have been surprised by the uses to which my work has sometimes been put. The number of historians who cite my work without seeming to understand (what I think of as) its radical epistemological implications is larger than I'd imagined. Journals sometimes send me

articles to read because they have ‘gender’ in the title, with a footnote to my 1986 AHR article. But when I read the article I have no idea why I’ve been cited. The author assumes gender to be a fixed and unequal relationship between women and men; there’s no attention to language (beyond a literal reading of words people said); no indication that the author has grappled with the implications of the work of Foucault or others even if they cite them; no ability to ask questions beyond the obvious ones historians usually ask. I hoped my work would push students (of history and other subjects) to think differently about what they were doing, instead these articles are more of the same, with different dates and themes, but rooted in the traditional and unexamined premises of their discipline.

**VH and LD:** We have noticed that, although ‘The Evidence of Experience’ is oft-cited, some readers seem to miss the important final turn in your argument, when you return to the text you open the essay with, Samuel R. Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* ([1988] 2004), and offer another reading of what Delany does in that text – formally and politically. To prepare your readers for the return to Delany, you first turn to Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the ‘contrast between the work of historians and literary scholars’ (Scott, 1991: 790–791), and the importance of bringing disciplines together in order to perform critical tasks that interrupt each other (p. 791). By reading history for the literary, you discover (or craft) a method for exploring the event of experience as and in representation (p. 794). So, it seems to us that you are making an important methodological intervention, and that your essay is an important early sign of the methodological turn in feminist theory. We say this partly out of concern that the notion that your work participates in or inaugurates a ‘linguistic turn’ doesn’t seem to capture at all your project in ‘The Evidence of Experience’. I guess our question is: do you consider your work participating in a ‘turn’, and if so, how would you characterise that move in a new direction?

**JWS:** Thank you for this reading of ‘Experience’ – it’s right on and attentive not only to what I said, but what I was trying to do. I don’t think the label ‘linguistic turn’ is at all useful for talking about my work, or for that matter, most of the other work that has been categorised that way. I think of my work as an example of *critique*, by which I mean the examination of foundational premises, the interrogation of the ways these premises establish what Foucault called ‘regimes of truth’ – unquestionable systems of thought that justify specific forms of social organisation and relationships of power. It’s precisely when one questions those ways of thinking, when one points out the contradictions and omissions, the paradoxes and erasures, that one opens the way for new ideas, new ways of thinking, different futures. To reduce critique to a ‘turn’ (linguistic or cultural) evacuates everything that’s radical about it, making it a matter of fashion or style rather than critical engagement with prevailing modes of thought.

It was out of a sense of frustration at the way that critique was being either recuperated or ignored, that some friends and I started a new journal, *History of the Present*. Its mission statement captures what we mean by critique:

*History of the Present* is a journal devoted to history as a critical endeavor. Its aim is twofold: to create a space in which scholars can reflect on the role history plays in establishing categories of contemporary debate by making them appear inevitable, natural, or culturally necessary; and to publish work that calls into question certainties about the relationship between past and present that are taken for granted by the majority of practicing historians. We seek to encourage the critical examination of history's influence on politics *and* the politics of the discipline of history itself.

There have been three issues of the journal so far and I think we have indeed achieved our objective of providing 'an intellectual space for historical scholarship that is explicitly political and theoretical, but not in the usual sense of those words'.

### **Desire in history / pleasure in theory**

**LD and VH:** As part of our background reading for the introduction to the special issue on 'Experience, Echo, Event: Theorising Feminist Histories' we enjoyed returning to the text that you use to frame your argument in 'The Evidence of Experience', Samuel R. Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water*. In your reading of Delany, you manage to capture both his (and your own?) desire to make the past visible and his (and your own?) meta-analysis of the 'substitution of one interpretation for another' (Scott, 1991: 794). Delany describes his practice of keeping notebooks with parallel columns – one column for the materiality of the past and one for desire. In his description, the columns converge, but don't merge into one. Formally, the columns are brought together in the text of *The Motion of Light in Water*. We wondered about your experience of reading this text. How did you first encounter Delany's memoir? Did Delany's method-image of parallel columns make sense to you in relation to your historical practice? I guess we are interested in why you chose to work with Delany's text in 'The Evidence of Experience'.

**JWS:** As I was leaving Santa Cruz after a long visit there, Donna Haraway pressed a copy of the Delany book into my hands. I read it all the way home on the plane, completely absorbed in the brilliance of the writing and tremendously excited by the analysis. I was in the midst of writing 'The Evidence of Experience' and Delany's way of addressing that issue seemed right to me. The multiplicity of meanings, the substitution of one interpretation for another, the unreliability of memory when it came to desire, the discrepancy between material and psychic realities – all of that insisted on the need for a complicated notion of 'experience'. It wasn't so much the parallel columns (his way of insisting on the incommensurability of the psychic and the social) that drew me, as the distinction between

registers that had to be made. If there's an image I retain from my reading, it's not the columns (too neat a way of making the separation), but the title of the book itself. Light on water shimmers and glistens and reflects – but inaccurately (like echo for sound) – and, in the end, it can't be neatly contained or reproduced in its elusiveness; it's always moving in response to shifts in the current or the wind. That seemed right for thinking about experience both in its immediacy and in memory. I think there was something ineffable I wanted to remind historians about: that our attempts to pin down 'experience' and attribute it to a set of known (usually rational) causes, was not the way to think about the history we were trying to write.

## The turn to psychoanalysis

**VH and LD:** How would you trace the development of your thinking from a call to read for the literary as a method of historical investigation and interpretation in 'The Evidence of Experience', to your turn to psychoanalytic concepts like fantasy in 'Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity' (2001), and your call for psychoanalysis as a 'critical reading practice' for historians in *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (2011)? Do you map this development in terms of a transition from what was called, at the time, 'the linguistic turn' in history, to one that refutes a simple distinction between the ontological and representation?

**JWS:** I don't think I've taken one turn (the linguistic) and now another (the psychoanalytic). For me, the point has been to find ways of probing meaning with a variety of theoretical tools. Literary interpretation already has psychoanalytic resonance and both deal with representation in one form or another. The psychoanalytic theory I turn to is not the one that applies diagnostic labels to aberrant cases; it is not the theory associated with normative prescription and the pathologisation of homosexuality. Rather it is the theory (associated most with American interpreters of Lacan) that posits sexual difference as an unresolvable dilemma, one that lets me look at the different and conflicting ways in which male and female, men and women have been represented. So in that sense, it allows me, as you say, to 'refute a simple distinction between the ontological and representation'. But I think poststructuralism had already refuted that distinction for me. The big change for me has been from a belief that I could pin down meaning and explain its origins in terms of social and economic influences, to an understanding of the elusiveness of finally knowing; it's the move from sure mastery of cause and effect to more tentative exploration of how meanings are pursued, how fantasy interferes with rational appreciations of interest, how desire eludes attempts to satisfy it. As I wrote in the introduction to *The Fantasy of Feminist History*,

If I had to summarize the change in my thinking as it relates to theorizing gender, I would say that the path is from sex as the known of physical bodies and so the referent for gender, to sexual difference as a permanent quandary – because ultimately unknowable – for modern subjects and so, again, the referent for gender. Gender

is, in other words, not the assignment of roles to physically different bodies, but the attribution of meaning to something that always eludes definition. (2011: 6)

## The use of psychoanalytic theories and concepts as a way to complicate ideas of historical agency and change

**VH and LD:** How does the psychoanalytic method of reading backwards, and symptomatically, help you to complicate the problem of agency and change in feminist history? What does this *method* of psychoanalytic interpretive reading add to the feminist theoretical and historical project in your view?

**JWS:** I'd say it's reading symptomatically that's important for me. (Historians always read backwards in a sense – it's how you read, not the direction in which you read that makes the difference.) One way that psychoanalysis complicates things is by introducing the agency of the unconscious into our readings. The object of interpretation is not just action, but the choice of words to explain it – the images offered, metaphors chosen, metonymic slippages, slips of the tongue, analogies made, erasures, inclusions. All of this makes it possible to think history (the history of feminism, to be sure, but all sorts of other histories as well) as made in discursive as well as material contexts. In fact, the material contexts come into being as objects of politics when they are conceived as such. But our conceptions of things, of selves, of ourselves, are also arrived at through fantasy – imagined identifications, projected wishes, displaced intentions. Psychoanalysis opens us to think in these terms, to look for explanations beyond the literal and the rational, to entertain the idea that not all actions express the reasoned self-interest of the actors. It's not that reason and self-interest are ruled out, just that there's more to 'agency' than the exercise of autonomous free will. Collective action, too, benefits from questions about the ways rhetorical appeals to commonality provide directions for desire, tapping into fantasmatic yearnings as well as reasoned assessments of interest.

## The importance of history for feminist theory

**VH and LD:** In a recent essay, Tani Barlow (2013) argues for the centrality of history to feminist theory, and criticises thinkers like Linda Zerilli (2005) for ignoring historiographical questions in favour of 'abyssal' arguments. For Barlow, this elision of history results in the inability of feminist theory to question its own conditions of possibility – even if, at the same time, it continues to question its historical development as a distinct field of inquiry.

How do you understand the relationship between history and feminist theory? Does history provide a way of being both inside and outside of feminist theory at the same time? We are also thinking here of what Judith Butler calls your mode of address as a historian. In 'Speaking Up, Talking Back: Joan Scott's Critical Feminism' she writes that your work in *Gender and the Politics of History* ([1988])

1999) and *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (1996), for example, ‘depends upon the preliminary efforts of [E. P.] Thompson and others to historicize labor and the working class, but it also *speaks back* to such histories’, and that ‘this speaking back is a way of opening up a new conceptual field for history. It is a kind of paradoxical speech that calls into question the conditions of its own speaking’ (Butler, 2011: 16, emphasis in original).

**JWS:** It depends on what you mean by history. So many historians, feminist historians, consider that their discipline operates outside of any kind of theory. I just heard a talk in which the historian excused her lack of attention to ‘theory’ by saying, ‘well, I’m just a historian and we don’t do that’. That’s of course nonsense – by refusing to acknowledge the frames within which they operate, these historians simply reproduce the theoretical or philosophical or political investments of their subjects, uncritically endorsing what they think they’re only describing. So, for the history of feminism, we get heroic accounts of resistance to patriarchy, without the questions that seem to me to matter for critical thinking: What explains the timing of outbursts of feminist activism? What kind of appeals are being made and in what terms? What do these tell us about the unconscious investments women have in the identities attributed to them as well as in the alternatives they want to articulate? Where are the contradictions, the inconsistencies, the aporia in the arguments being made? How do we understand those as at once exposing the limits of particular discourses (republicanism, nationalism, democracy, secularism, liberalism, socialism, trade unionism...) and staying within their bounds? What does the history of feminism tell us about other histories? How are women’s subject positions constructed not only within the prevailing terms of sexual difference, but of race, ethnicity, religion, national identity? What are the fantasmatic elements involved in these assumptions and attributions of identity?

**VH and LD:** So, would you say here that the history of feminist theory can only be written dialogically – as a form of reaction rather than inauguration? In other words, could you say something about paradox as a productive mode of historical thinking for feminist theory?

**JWS:** What history wouldn’t be written dialogically? In some ways, all human action is a reaction to something, an engagement with prevailing ways of being and thinking, isn’t it? I think I’d rather place the history of feminist theory under the rubric of critical history. The point has been to find ways of understanding how the terms of sexual difference are enunciated, how religion or science gives authority to those terms, how social norms are established and enforced, how – in what ways and with what terms – they are challenged and changed. Various feminists have theorised these problems, offering explanations about their causes and operations. The object of attention is the repeated asymmetry attributed to the relations between the sexes and to the inequalities – in access to resources, social status, political influence and power – between women and men that result.

Paradox? For me it's been a really useful way of thinking about the history of feminism (at least the history I know about – modern, Western) because the goal of equality is always thwarted by the continuing dilemma of sexual difference. What kind of equality is envisioned? What problems would it correct? What problems does it leave unsolved? In some of my work, paradox refers specifically to the equality/difference question as it's been expressed in feminist political campaigns. In order to demand equality, women had to insist on their difference – if only to refuse it. Does anatomical difference make a difference? How? When? Where? This is where some of the psychoanalytic work helps me see the intractable difficulties feminists face.

## Locations

**VH and LD:** Finally, you were trained as a historian of nineteenth-century France: how have your intellectual and political interests in, and connections to, France (and Europe more broadly) shaped your approach to the historiographical and theoretical debates in American feminist theory over the past twenty to twenty-five years? We are thinking here of the very different ways in which psychoanalysis has been taken up and utilised in French feminist politics and theory, as well as the current interest in the anti-postmodern, post-Marxist approach to the political by philosophers like Alain Badiou.

**JWS:** I'm not sure I'm going to answer the way you want me to, but I'll try anyway. I was trained as a historian of nineteenth-century France. The American feminist movement pushed me to think about women's history in the 1970s. At Berkshire Conferences and in study groups, in my collaboration on *Women, Work, and Family* with Louise Tilly (1978), and in many other venues, I engaged the debates you refer to. When I went to teach at Brown in 1980, I was exposed to French feminism as well as to French poststructuralist philosophy. The Brown experience was formative and I've not changed my mind or moved beyond it. (So Badiou, while interesting to read, is not formative for my thinking.) As I said earlier, I took it with me to the Institute and it continues to inform my work. Psychoanalysis (with its poststructuralist twist – not 'turn') has expanded my horizons, but not drastically changed them. As new questions and new topics draw my interest, these are the lenses through which I will continue to approach them.

**VH and LD:** Thank you!

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