Suddenly the transnational is everywhere. Until about 2000, historical studies that looked beyond one nation or region generally termed themselves comparative, cross-national, international, or global, but within the last few years all of these words have become slightly old-fashioned, and “transnational” is the word of choice. This move has included the history of women, gender, and sexuality: a recent Forum in the *American Historical Review* was titled “Transnational Sexualities,” and the organizers of the 2011 Berkshire Women’s History conference, in their words, “restructured the conference to take advantage of new upsurges of intellectual energy in global history, transnational and transregional history,” with twenty-eight of the conference’s 190 sessions including the word “transnational” in their title.¹

In many cases, “transnational” is used rather unreflectively as a synonym for comparative, cross-national, international, and global, or simply for conference sessions and essay collections that focus on more than one country. Some scholars have sought to define the term more closely, however. These more theoretical considerations have focused on the issue

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of geographic borders and their crossing. As might be expected given the actual word, some of these have limited their definitions to national borders: Ian Tyrrell, for example, comments that “transnational history refers to a broad range of phenomena cutting across national boundaries.” But most have included a wider range of borders. In their dictionary of transnational history, Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier define their topic as “what moves between and across different polities and societies.” Steven Vertovec’s Transnational, an introduction to the field designed for students, describes the book’s subject as “sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations, and social formations.” A widely-read discussion of transnational history published in the American Historical Review emphasizes the centrality of the study of “movements, flows, and circulations” across all borders.

The narrower definition proposed by Tyrrell would seem to preclude studies of the early modern period, in which “nations,” as we understand them, were few. Indeed, most work that defines itself as transnational has focused on the world after the eighteenth century, and much, in fact, on the world after the twentieth century, in which transnational border-crossing is seen as a result of current patterns of globalization.

If we use the broader definition, however, the early modern period offers many possibilities, particularly because scholars who examine the era from a global perspective often see border-crossing as its most distinctive feature. The description of The Journal of Early Modern History, launched

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4 Steven Vertovec, Transnationalism (London: Routledge, 2009), 2.

5 “American Historical Review Conversation: On Transnational History” (with Chris Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed), American Historical Review 111/5 (December 2006): 1441–64.

6 Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor, eds., Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective (New York: Routledge, 2004) contains a long bibliography (pp. 186–97) of comparative, cross-national, and transnational studies for almost all of the modern period.
at the University of Minnesota in 1997, states: “The early modern period of world history (ca. 1300–1800) was marked by a rapidly increasing level of global interaction. Between the aftermath of Mongol conquest in the East and the onset of industrialization in the West, a framework was established for new kinds of contacts and collective self-definition across an unprecedented range of human and physical geographies.”

Sanjay Subrahmanyam comments that the period “defines a new sense of the limits of the inhabited world, in good measure because it is in a fundamental way an age of travel and discovery, of geographical redefinition.” He sees the effects of these interactions in “complex changes in political theology” and “new and intensified forms of hierarchy, domination, and separation.”

Evelyn Rawski agrees, noting that “elites, ideas, and religions moved across regions with greater frequency than ever before, significantly influencing intellectual and cultural life.”

Like all interactions, those of the early modern era were gendered, but they took a new form. The contacts between cultures in the era before 1400 that had worked to change gender structures had often been carried out through the transmission of ideas and construction of institutions by individuals or small groups of people; the spread of Christianity,

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9 Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories,” 739.
neo-Confucianism, and Islam are all examples of this. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, however, transnational contacts often involved the movement of large numbers of people over vast distances. In all of these movements, the gender balance between men and women was never equal, so that traditional patterns of marriage and family life were disrupted and new patterns were formed. A growing body of scholarship is examining these new patterns, developing rich analyses of the social and cultural forms that emerged in the more connected early modern world.

Women certainly travelled and migrated in the early modern era, and scholars in a number of fields are examining their experiences, often through the written records that they left behind. The vast majority of merchants, conquerors, slaves, and settlers who traveled great distances were men, however. Though there were attempts to keep groups apart, this proved impossible. Intermarriage and other types of sexual relationships among individuals from different groups in the early modern era occurred especially in colonies or border regions that Kathleen Brown has labeled “gender frontiers.”

Research is demonstrating how such relationships


were interwoven with developing notions of racial difference and national identity. As Giulia Calvi summarizes in her recent comparison of global gender history in Europe and the US, “the gendered bodies of colonizers and colonized formed a contact zone where racialized notions of gender relations and difference were constructed through the exercise and representation of colonial power.”

To take one example in detail: Saliha Belmessous, Jennifer Spear, and Guillame Aubert have analyzed the way French policy in colonial North America changed depending on changing ideas about how best to increase both the colonies’ and France’s strength. Most immigrants in the seventeenth century were unemployed young men from urban environments, who stayed briefly and then either died or went back to France. For a brief period in the 1660s the French crown directly recruited young women to go to New France, mostly poor women from charity hospitals, and paid for their passage. About eight hundred of these filles du roi (daughters of the king) did immigrate, more than doubling the number of European women who were not nuns, but their numbers were never great enough to have a significant effect on the population. French finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert decided not to expand the program, however, stating explicitly in 1667 that “it would not be wise to depopulate the kingdom in order to populate Canada.” Instead he recommended that “the most useful way to achieve it would be to try to civilize the Algonquins, the Hurons, and the other Savages who have embraced Christianity; and to persuade them to come to settle in a commune with the French, to live with them, and educate their children in our mores and our customs . . . after some time, having one law and one master, they may form one people and one blood.”


Thus official policy in New France in the seventeenth century was one of the assimilation of Native Americans through *Fransication*, through which they would be “made French.” The policy of *Fransication* included intermarriage between French men and indigenous women, for the French hoped that such marriages would help the fur trade and strengthen ties between French and Native American communities and families. In a few cases, this policy had exactly the effect that the government hoped it would: couples married in Christian ceremonies and Indian women adopted the clothing, work patterns, and language of French women; they crossed the border from native to French.

In many more cases the opposite happened, however. Marriages, if they occurred at all, were “in the custom of the land,” and French men adopted “savage” customs. Official opinion changed. “One should never mix a bad blood with a good one,” wrote the governor of New France in 1709. “Our experience of [intermarriage] in this country ought to prevent us from permitting marriages of this kind, for all the French men who have married savage women have been licentious, lazy and have become intolerably independent; and the children they have had are even lazier than the savages themselves. Such marriages should thus be prohibited.”

Prohibition of intermarriage became official policy in New France in 1716, and Indian/French marriages were discouraged by secular officials elsewhere in French North America. Despite the fulminations of authorities against mixing blood, however, European men and Indian women continued to engage in sexual relations in western French North America and, in areas where intermarriage worked to the benefit of the local people, to marry. These marriages were often formalized by Native American rituals rather than Christian ones; only sixty-five church marriages between French men and Indian women are listed in the records for all of New France during the whole period 1608 to 1765, out of a total of more than 27,000 marriages.

In 1724, French colonial Louisiana (which included a large part of the Mississippi Valley) also forbade the “King’s white subjects” to “contract

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a marriage or live in concubinage with Blacks.”\textsuperscript{16} Officials in Louisiana tried positive measures as well as prohibitions. They succeeded in convincing the king to pay again for the transport of women from France, and from 1704 to 1728 several hundred French women came to Louisiana. The administrators wanted “hard-working girls . . . daughters of farmers and the like,” but the young women were often recruited from houses of detention in France, so instead turned out to be “women and girls of bad life” who were also “extremely ugly.” Male settlers refused to marry the new arrivals, and in 1727 the governor of Louisiana recommended building a “house of correction here in order to put in the women and girls of bad lives who cause a public scandal.”\textsuperscript{17} The program was stopped in the following year. French Louisiana became an area of great cultural and racial mixing, a situation that has continued to today. Such shifting policy toward intermarriage and great variation in levels of enforcement can be found throughout the early modern colonial world.\textsuperscript{18}

Marriage created an economic unit as well as a sexual relationship, and historians have begun to examine the economic consequences of intermarriage and other encounters involving men and women from different groups in frontier, border, and colonial areas.\textsuperscript{19} George Brooks, for example,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[18] See my Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (London: Routledge, 2010) for a fuller discussion of this topic and references to many other studies.
\end{footnotes}
traces the ways in which European and local notions about acceptable marriage partners combined in the early modern colonies of West Africa to create distinctive economic and social patterns. In the patrilineal societies of West Africa, such as the Mandinka and Wolof, Portuguese men and their mixed-race children were not allowed to marry local people of free standing, as this could give them claims to land use; their children could not inherit or join the kin and age-grade associations that shaped political power structures. Brooks has found that this meant mixed-race children generally went into trade, and in some places women became the major traders, with large households, extensive networks of trade, and many servants and slaves. Because these wealthy female traders, called *nharas* in Crioulo and *signares* in French, had connections with both the African and European worlds, they were valued as both trade and marriage partners by the French and English traders who moved into this area in the eighteenth century. “Some of these women were married in church,” reported one French commentator, “others in the style of the land, which in general consists of the consent of both parties and the relatives.”

In the latter form of marriage, the women’s European husbands would have paid bridewealth to their new in-laws (instead of receiving a dowry as was the custom in Europe), provided a large feast, and been expected to be sexually faithful. If the husband returned to Europe, the *signare* was free to marry again. Thus intermarriage facilitated and was a key part of a pattern of cultural exchange in which European men adopted local customs far more than

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their indigenous wives adopted European ones, just as did French men in western North America.

Women acted as intermediaries between local and foreign cultures in other parts of the world as well, sometimes gaining great advantages for themselves and their children though their contact with dominant foreigners, though also sometimes suffering greatly as their contact with foreigners began when they were sold or given as gifts by their families or taken forcibly.\textsuperscript{21} Throughout much of the early modern colonial world a mestizo culture emerged in which not only ethnicity, but religions, family patterns, cultural traditions, and languages blended.\textsuperscript{22} Transnational history increasingly emphasizes mixture and hybridity as well as border-crossing; the majority of this scholarship has focused on the empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or the globalized contemporary world, but early modern colonial settings provide some of the most significant examples.\textsuperscript{23}

“Gender frontiers” were not only found in the colonies, however. In Strasbourg, the Lutheran city council debated in 1631 whether citizens should lose their citizenship if they married Calvinists. Such debates were common in many territories of the Holy Roman Empire after the middle of the sixteenth century. Earlier, most reformers had decided that religious conversion did not give one the right to leave one’s spouse. One could pray he or she would see the light, but not leave. The later debates were about marriage formation, however, not about changes in marriages that already existed. Should people be allowed to marry across religious lines? In general, the answer was no. Spouses were to be (quoting city councils here)

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} See the essays by Verena Stolcke on the Atlantic World, Barbara Andaya on Southeast Asia, and Marcia Wright on Africa in Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., \textit{A Companion to Gender History} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).
\item \textsuperscript{23} Peter Burke, \textit{Cultural Hybridity} (London: Polity, 2009) provides an excellent brief introduction to current and past thinking about mixture.
\end{itemize}
“one in body and spirit,” and a mixed marriage would create “one body and two minds” and “cause arguments, quarrels, blasphemous wild conduct, and often half-hearted belief.” Authorities ordered sermons to be preached against mixed marriage, warning of the dangers to the soul “seduced by the infamous sweet poison of heretical teaching.”

Even the body might be endangered, as Lutheran blood mixed with Calvinist blood, or, even worse, Catholic blood mixed with Protestant blood. The Strasbourg city council largely agreed with this, but, like all early modern authorities, they also worried about unmarried women, those “masterless” women free to saunter about the city and spend their wages on frivolous things. So they decided that a Lutheran man who married a Calvinist woman would not lose his citizenship because (in the words of the council) “he can probably draw his spouse away from her false religion and bring her on the correct path,” though he would have to pay a fine for “bringing an unacceptable person into the city.” A woman who married a Calvinist would lose her citizenship, however, “because she would let herself easily be led into error in religion by her husband and be led astray.”

Thus the gender frontier of Strasbourg also became a gendered frontier, in which notions of male and female honor and sexuality shaped state policies about difference and intermarriage, just as they did in French Canada and French Louisiana.

This did not end with the early modern era, of course. Ann Stoler has noted the ways in which “patterns of colonial intimacies in early America” were replicated in later colonial settings, which her own work and that of Antoinette Burton, Francis Gouda, and many others examines.


Dagmar Herzog comments about contemporary Europe: “The entire complex of issues surrounding European identities and citizenships, with all the accompanying assumptions about appropriate inclusions and exclusions, now rests with remarkable frequency on sex-related concerns.”

Not only did early modern patterns of interaction shape those of later eras, but the movement and interconnections that characterized the period also shaped the experiences of people who did not move an inch, for any fixed location can be saturated with transnational relationships. The migration of large numbers of men, for example, had an influence on gender structures in the areas they left as well as those to which they moved. Two thirds of the slaves carried across the Atlantic from Africa were male, with female slaves more likely to become part of the trans-Saharan trade or to stay in West Africa. This change reinforced polygyny, because slave women could join households as secondary wives, thus increasing the wealth and power of their owner/husbands through their work and children. (They were often favored as wives over free women because they were far away from their birth families, which could thus not interfere in a husband’s decisions). In parts of Europe, male migration also contributed to a gender imbalance among certain social groups. Because Christianity and Judaism did not allow polygyny, solutions were more difficult than in Africa. Male migration may have contributed to the entry of more women into convents in Catholic areas, or to dowries reaching the stratospheric heights they did for wealthy families in Italian cities, which itself led to more women being


sent to convents. In Protestant areas, male travel and migration reinforced the existing pattern of late marriage and large numbers of women who remained single, which has been studied by a number of historians.

Thus, through our work on cross-border relationships, hybrid social structures and cultural institutions, and intensified forms of hierarchy in local and global settings, scholars of early modern women, gender, and sexuality have much to contribute to the new transnational discussions. In addition, we have long engaged in another border-crossing process that transnational scholars view as a hallmark of their enterprise: crossing the borders between disciplines. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann have noted that a central feature of transnational history is a “multiplicity of possible viewpoints and the divergences resulting from languages, terminologies, categorizations and conceptualizations, traditions, and disciplinary usages.” This might serve equally well as a description of both the Society for Early Modern Women and its journal, in which interdisciplinarity and multivocality have been both an aim and a reality.


31 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” History and Theory 45 (February 2006): 30. Werner and Zimmermann distinguish between transnational history and their notion of histoire croisée, but most definitions of transnational history are broad enough to include everything that they view as a hallmark of histoire croisée.