

FORUM

Gender History: A Necessary Key to Understanding Central Europe

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Abstract

Seven specialists in Central and East Central European history have come together to discuss the state of the field of gender studies in their subfields. Much emphasis is placed on thinking about how the current political situation in the 2020s is affecting what historians do, what is taught in the classroom, and how it relates to the larger political environment. This forum is based on the 2026 American Historical Association (AHA) Central European History Society (CEHS) presidential panel of the same name. The contributors collaborated to produce a forum accessible to non-specialists and for use in the classroom. It serves as a resource for anyone interested in the historiography of gender studies for the region, which includes the lands east of France and west of Russia.

Keywords: Central Europe; East Central Europe; gender; sexuality; intersectionality; LGBTQ+; transnational; science and medicine; historiography; archives

“Oh God, Will My Students Have Access to Gender History and Theory?” Introduction by Dominique Kirchner Reill

On March 12, 1920, Giuseppe Zanolla came to the courthouse in the Adriatic port town of Fiume/Rijeka to give testimony in a divorce case. Zanolla seemed quite willing to be there: he was twenty-five years old with plenty of time on his hands, because he had recently been laid off from his job at the tobacco factory for stealing a kilo of goods. He also had personal reasons to want to testify: his brother-in-law and friend, Antonio Kunzarich, was suing

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for divorce and for custody of his toddler son. Zanolla wanted to make sure his “brother” Kunzarich won and that that “immoral woman,” Giuseppina Kunzarich *née* Sluga, got what she deserved, which was censure. Divorce trials—today as in yesteryears—are notoriously unpleasant affairs, especially when children are involved. In such situations, family members’ testimonies often tend to reveal more “dirt” than usual. Zanolla’s testimony was no exception. In fact, the tales he told the courthouse about Giuseppina Kunzarich were salacious, filled with scenes of alcohol, drugs, orgies, and disconcerting moments where little was said but much was meant.

Among the many descriptions Zanolla gave of Giuseppina Kunzarich’s active extramarital sex life and recreational drug habits was a short sentence, one that since I first read it in 2011 still fascinates me to this day. He stated: “Once she came to the tobacco factory dressed as a sailor.”¹ This sentence, and the testimony from which it comes, has not been included in my published work (more on why below), but it has played a pivotal role in my graduate teaching. I use Zanolla’s testimony in first-year research seminar courses to push students to think about how to approach primary sources. None of the students in this grad course knows anything about Fiume/Rijeka; most know nothing about the Habsburg Empire, Central Europe, Croatia, Italy, or the greater Adriatic; a few know something about the immediate years after World War I in Europe, but their knowledge of “Europe” usually centers around the UK, France, and Germany. This is not a problem for me. Actually, it is precisely why I do this assignment. I want students to think abstractly of what one needs to look for, what questions one needs to bring to a source, and what methodologies of analysis need to be applied to learn more about the past without presentism getting in the way. Being foreign to the cultural and administrative world of the source I believe helps students to take a step back so they can ask questions many forget to ask when they are too “in” their research topic.

Before class discussion, I provide the students with a translation of Zanolla’s testimony, personal information about all the people mentioned in the testimony from the police files, and then I ask the students to write a page describing what they think they would need to learn more about in order to analyze this source effectively. Almost every student so far has read Zanolla’s stories of sex and drunkenness, and they all jump to that same sentence of “dressed as a sailor” that I did. Every single time I have taught this document, the same question also pops up early in the conversation: “But, professor, why haven’t you used this?” My answer stems from the same reason why I give this assignment, the same reason why I put together the Central European History Society (CEHS) presidential panel roundtable on Central European gender studies that serves as the basis for this forum, and the same reason why I am so pleased that this wonderful assortment of scholars agreed to participate in the roundtable piece you are about to read.

The reason I have never used this source is simple: I believe that the only way to unlock what that cross-dressing moment in the archival source means is through a multi-pronged approach informed by gender theory and the methodologies honed by practitioners of gender history, an approach I am still trying to learn how to adopt effectively. Only thanks to reading and discussing the work by my colleagues who have specialized in this field do I feel like I am getting closer to coming up with ideas of how to understand why Giuseppina Kunzarich *née* Sluga arrived at work dressed as a sailor, what that meant to the world around her, and why Zanolla mentioned it in his testimony at the divorce trial. No one—not I, not my students, nor anyone else perusing archival sources—should make assumptions or provide on-the-spot explanations of that moment, what it was meant to mean in the courtroom, or what it reveals to thinkers today of the lived worlds of the past.

¹ Hrvatski državni arhiv- Rijeka (HR-DARI), 112 Gradjanski i krivični predmeti 1918, kutija 719, 1006, Giuseppe Zanolla, Testimony given for divorce proceedings, March 12, 1920.

A first assumption might be that the party-avid Giuseppina Kunzarich arrived at work in that sailor uniform out of a Marlene-Dietrichesque gender rebelliousness, but many other reasons could be true. This could just as likely have been a moment where a woman arrived at work in the only clothes left her after a violent encounter (rape was rampant in postwar Europe, especially in a town like Fiume/Rijeka, which was occupied by thousands of foreign soldiers and sailors). Historians of the region ever sensitive to the pulls of nationalism might interpret it as a nationalistically imbued act, if Kunzarich arrived at her highly Croatian-/Hungarian-/Slovene-dominated tobacco factory in the uniform of the Italian occupier, as she was known to have had many intimate associations with Italian soldiers. Or it could have been something closer to what such an act today might suggest. Perhaps Kunzarich was dressing *out* how she was *within*? The source alone does not provide answers. It could be any of these reasons, a combination of these reasons, or maybe something totally different. Her cross-dressing act could have communicated something that the people in the courtroom would have understood and that we have been trained to overlook.

As I discussed with my students and I still struggle with today, the only way to understand Kunzarich's act is through careful method applied to research willing to go against the grain. In today's world, with the attack on gender studies as a field and the targeting against gender scholars and activists, I feel like access to best understand the past (and the present) is being directly hindered for myself, my colleagues, our students, and our greater communities. To date when I taught this class, the motto was "go forth and read more gender history and theory" before approaching the past. Now I'm thinking: "Oh God, will my students have access to gender history and theory?"

This forum is a call-to-arms to keep histories and methodologies of gender and sexuality analysis front and center, regardless of the pressures currently trying to push them into obscurity or infamy. The exact contours of this forum derive from the aforementioned CEHS presidential roundtable held at the American Historical Association's Annual Meeting in January 2026, where five scholars—from different career stages, different chronological and geographical specialties, and different schools of historical analysis—accepted my invitation to participate.

Saying that this forum is ridiculously rich in talent is an understatement. It includes thrilling and courageous scholars, including Sonja Dolinsek, whose new work looks at the transnational aspects of sexual labor; Tiffany N. Florvil, whose publications have made us all realize how deeply race, gender, internationalism, and social activism co-aligned in twentieth-century German-speaking Europe; Anita Kurimay, whose publications on the history of sexuality and gender in modern Hungary and East Central Europe have laid bare so much more about the politics of the far right and of sports than we knew; Alisha Rankin, whose work on the history of gender, science, and medicine in early modern, German-speaking Europe show how much our understanding of cures (and poisons) depend on unknown women's involvement therein; and Michał J. Wilczewski, whose investigations into the world of modern Polish pornography reveal the contours of change in sexual morality.

Together these five fascinating scholars agreed on the following: they decided they wanted to publish a forum that would be accessible to non-specialists and could be used in the classroom. Together they agreed on the questions to which they would respond. Finally, together they read each other's responses and revised accordingly. I then asked my cherished colleague, Jill Massino, a gender historian working on East Central Europe, to write an epilogue to the forum, reflecting on what this all means for European history and gender and sexuality studies writ large.

Before concluding this introduction and jumping into learning how these experts understand their field and their field's future, I think it might be helpful to highlight the

difference between two key geographical terms used throughout this forum: Central Europe versus East Central Europe. The distinctions between these two terms could be debated endlessly, of course, but as a general guideline, let me take a moment to clarify. The difference between Central and East Central Europe is not as much geographical, as chronological. Before World War II, Central Europe was a term used to describe the areas more or less between the Rhine and Volga rivers, often equated with the lands within the Holy Roman Empire and/or Habsburg states, with an emphasis often placed on German and/or Habsburg hegemony. After World War II, the political division of Europe between US- and Soviet- dominated zones led to the common usage of the term “East Central Europe,” to reference those areas west of Russia and east and southeast of West Germany (FRG), often emphasizing the predominant Slavic identity of the region.² As one can imagine, the two terms Central and East Central Europe often overlap: East Germany (GDR) and portions of the lands of today’s Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Slovenia are usually included in both terms. East Central Europe does not include today’s *united* Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or northeastern Italy, which Central Europe usually does. Central Europe usually does not include most of the Balkans, Baltic, and Black Sea areas, though often East Central Europe can. Today, scholars use these terms as regional descriptors outside the chronological templates of when the terms took on common usage. Conferences are regularly held on topics before the twentieth century using “East Central Europe” as the regional moniker. That is why someone like me (who works on the nineteenth century in the area of today’s Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia) is often included in conferences about “Central Europe” and “East Central Europe” interchangeably, which I am happy to embrace. Terms for broad geographical regions are necessarily vague, so for this forum’s purposes it is not necessary to make a list of which geographical areas belong to which category for which time period. What is important is to understand what the general idea is behind what is meant when using one term or the other.

Now back to the forum! The authors below have provided insights from their interlocking fields to help make sure classrooms and research projects still have the access points necessary to treat gender and sexuality as important, sensitive, and requiring great care and much work, the kind of work necessary to unlock archival moments like that of Giuseppina Kunzarich *née* Sluga with which I began this short introduction. I hope you take as much as I have from reading what they have shared.

In a recent blog post summarizing the findings from the first Central European History Convention held in Vienna July 2025, Susanne Korbel noted “It was immediately clear from the program that gender is no longer a niche subject but a vital and productive lens for exploring the full breadth of Central European history.”³ Do you believe this is true more generally in the field of Central European history? If so, does this speak to something specific about the region (and how it is studied)? If not, do you think there is something about international conventions or certain streams of historiography that create this impression (that is not really the full story)?

² It is also common for “Eastern Europe” to be used as a synonym for East Central Europe. For a very clear discussion of the term “East Central Europe” written by one of the field’s most respected practitioners see Joachim von Puttkamer, “East Central Europe,” in *European History Online (EGO)*, ed. Stephan Troebst (Mainz: Leibniz Institute of European History IEG, 2015) (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/puttkamerj-2014-en> URN: urn:nbn:de:0159-2,015,083,112 [2026-06-27]).

³ Susanne Korbel, “Navigating t(hr)o(ugh) Gender Studies Perspectives at CEH-C,” Looking back—looking ahead, ed. Peter Becker and Dominique Kirchner Reill (online blog forum), (<https://cehc.hypotheses.org/344>).

Sonja Dolinsek

There are two claims in Korbel's statement that need to be considered within the broader context of the mid-2020s. The first concerns the analytical value of "gender" in Central European history, or any history. Clearly, gender historians agree on this point, and as Tiffany Florvil notes, it is a no-brainer. Yet Korbel's observation also addresses the institutionalization of gender history in universities, which is and has been the more pressing issue in this region. I believe both aspects deserve separate consideration, even though they are related. While international conferences provide heightened visibility across fields of history, they may or may not reflect a deeper institutionalization process in research, funding, and teaching. In my personal experience, becoming the gender historian who I am today has been deeply tied to what these sorts of conferences provided in developing comparative and theoretical skills at gender analysis. I would not be where I am today without the conferences and workshops where I met European and North American scholars who had been working on the same topic, different yet complementary approaches to how to investigate gender. One such scholar, who I had the honor of working with was the still-much mourned Philippa Hetherington, who did so much to help develop and refine my approach to international histories of trafficking and anti-trafficking. It is through the network she had built with Julia Laite that I was able to connect with other scholars in the field.⁴

From the vantage point of my own academic path, these conferences made up for the limited opportunities to learn and exchange ideas about gender history during my studies at Humboldt University in Berlin. The only explicit gender history class I took was on ancient history, and I first encountered Gisela Bock only after coming back from a formative year abroad at Brown University while researching for my master's thesis on commercial sex in West Germany. In 1980, Bock had published a chapter on Nazi prostitution politics for the first German-edited collection published by sex workers themselves.⁵ Based on this experience and what I have heard from students and colleagues, I would argue that gender history is still only sparsely and unevenly institutionalized in Central Europe, particularly in Germany, where many history departments still treat it as optional. Scholars who do not primarily focus on gender have yet to find ways to integrate this perspective beyond writing a section or chapter on "women" or adding a few footnotes. Whether students and future researchers have access to courses or supervision in gender history often depends more on the research focus of individual scholars than on explicit and stable faculty positions, curricula, or training expectations.⁶

⁴ See for instance, our joint article: Sonja Dolinsek and Philippa Hetherington, "Cold War and International Law: Socialist Internationalism and Decolonizing Moralities in the UN Anti-Trafficking Regime, 1947–1954," *Journal of the History of International Law* 21, no. 2 (2019): 212–238. Alongside her, many scholars with whom I worked over the course of my rather fragmented academic path contributed to my intellectual development. I would especially like to mention Eileen Boris, Christiane Brenner, Elisa Camiscioli, Anna Hájková, Siobhán Hearne, Dietlind Hüchtler, Priska Komaromi, Julia Laite, Annalisa Martin, Jessica Pliley, Andrea Rottmann, Magaly Rodríguez García, Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Iris Schröder, Keely Stauter-Halsted. See also the special issue, co-edited with Siobhán Hearne, "Prostitution in Twentieth-Century Europe," *European Review of History* 29, no. 2 (2022): 121–362; as well as an edited collection co-edited with Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, *Histories of Prostitution in Central, East Central and South Eastern Europe* (Paderborn: Brill 2023). Philippa Hetherington died of cancer in 2022, courageously sharing with the world the many struggles of her fight for life in order to spread awareness. While I encourage reading all her work, I wish to honor her by citing one of her last texts, a feminist text on cancer: Philippa Hetherington, "More than pink" *aeon.com*, 19 September 2023, URL (<https://aeon.co/essays/how-breast-cancer-rips-up-conventional-markers-of-gender>). Her first book was published posthumously in July 2026: Philippa Hetherington, *Circulating Subjects: Sex Work and Migration in Russia, 1885–1935* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2026).

⁵ Gisela Bock, "Keine Arbeitskräfte in diesem Sinne: Prostituierte im Nazi-Staat," in *Frauen wie andere auch. Prostituierte und ihre Kämpfe*, ed. Pieke Bierman (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1980), 70–106.

⁶ Andreas Neumann et al., eds., *Geschlechtergeschichte bleibt?! Herausforderungen und Perspektiven historischer Geschlechterforschung* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025).

That is not to say that students themselves are not interested in the field. Instead, the problem is that learning opportunities are uneven. In 2024, history students organized the first “Symposium on the State of Gender History in Germany,” and they began connecting students across the country to collectively advocate for stronger inclusion of gender history in university curricula.⁷ It is 2026, and still only a small number of professorships in Germany are explicitly dedicated to women’s or gender history, even though many historians in broader fields also research and teach gender history. At the same time, gender history classes are often taught by hourly paid adjunct lecturers on precarious terms, which can make sustained teaching and supervision in the field difficult. I, myself, taught in this capacity for many years. Positions held by retired gender historians will remain unfilled, as in Jena (Gisela Mettele) and Magdeburg (Eva Labouvie). Luckily, a position at Freiburg University is being filled again. Magdeburg University, where I teach, is a unique case that we all hope will remain unique. There the history department was disbanded in 2015, and if the plan is followed through to the end, my cohort is the last generation of historians to hold positions there. Furthermore, as of May 2026, the forthcoming state election in Saxony-Anhalt in September is raising fears that for the first time a state will be governed by the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), whose leaders not only wish to prohibit all gender research but also aim to influence what and how history is taught, and what is remembered in museums in order to foster a positive relationship to history and a “self-conscious German identity.”⁸ Kurimay’s reflections on Hungary below suggest that histories of gender and sexuality can help contest right-wing claims about nation, belonging, and “gender ideology” by making LGBTQ+ lives, feminist struggles, and different forms of belonging visible as part of national and regional histories.

In juxtaposition to these grim facts, more hopeful is indeed the continued vitality of conferences, workshops, and networks such as the *Arbeitskreis für Historische Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung* (AKHFG), of which I am a member, and the previously DFG-funded network *Contemporary Queer Histories in German-speaking Europe*. The new director of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (IfZ), Isabel Heinemann, will continue working on gender and women’s history in her new position. However, the political backlash against “gender”—coupled with opposition to queer and women’s rights; the return of anti-feminism alongside an AI hype, driven by a techno-utopian ideology rooted in anti-democratic and patriarchal beliefs and a near-religious faith in quantification; and increasing hostility toward the humanities and social sciences—certainly does not help. I believe we should be cautious about narratives of progress and prepare for shrinking spaces of agency.

Tiffany N. Florvil

In the United States, scholars often reference Joan Scott’s important “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” 1986 *AHR* article as an impetus for gender studies, and rightfully so.⁹ Yet some scholars of Central European history had already laid the groundwork for women’s and gender history. For example, I think of the same scholar Sonja Dolinsek just mentioned, Gisela Bock, especially her 1983 article “Racism and Sexism in

⁷ Student Working Group on “Gender History”/AG Geschlechtergeschichte. Erstes Symposium zur Lage der Geschlechtergeschichte an deutschen Universitäten, 06.06.2024–08.06.2024, Humboldt-University Berlin (https://www.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/de/das-institut/fachschaftsinitiative/arbeitsgemeinschaften/arbeitsgemeinschaft-geschlechtergeschichte/copy2_of_aktuelle-veranstaltungen)

⁸ Alternative für Deutschland, “Regierungsprogramm” (<https://afd-regierungsprogramm.de/>).

⁹ Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

Nazi Germany.”¹⁰ Some of these early studies were attentive to racial, ethnic, and religious differences, giving intersectionality space in a European context that often imagined itself as raceless. This is all to say that this rich lineage has led us to Susanne Korbel’s assertion “that gender is no longer a niche subject but a vital and productive lens for exploring the full breadth of European history.”

Yet Dolinsek’s assessment of Germany seems to support her theory of spottiness. She has offered important details about dynamics in Germany. I have long associated German gender history with a few figures, especially Bock, who passed away in 2025, and powerhouse scholars of German gender history are often based in the United States, including Atina Grossmann, Marion Kaplan, and Dagmar Herzog, to reference a few. In the USA, we also have international conferences such as the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Genders, and Sexuality (the Berks), the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA), and the Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH), that have offered intellectual community and support to many scholars. The latter two conferences have been particularly inclusive and welcoming to minoritized scholars in ways that the Berks has not; but I note that the Berks has new leadership, pushing for change, especially after a series of unsettling racist incidents at its 2023 conference. Additionally, institutions—such as the Freie Universität Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Universität zu Köln—have programs in gender studies, but this development is not necessarily widespread across history departments. While an academic emphasis on intersectionality has grown in recent years, this approach has not translated across history programs in Germany (or Austria for that matter).¹¹ I should note that I am participating in the AKHFG’s international conference titled “Women’s and Gender History in Times of Challenges to Democracy, Diversity and Responsibility” in Bielefeld in September 2026. This confirms the importance of these international spaces, as Dolinsek noted.

The centrality of gender is not only the case with Central European history but also other geographic areas within our discipline (i.e., American, African, Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, or Western European). Yet scholars of slavery in the fields of African American, African, Caribbean, and Latin American history as well as activist-intellectuals theorizing Black feminism predate the 1980s Central European turn to gender. Consider Martinican intellectuals Paulette and Jane Nardal’s creation of the journal *La Revue du Monde Noir* (*The Review of the Black World*, 1931), or Trinidadian-born Communist Claudia Jones’s 1949 “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!”¹² These works have been credited with an early focus on intersectionality and were attentive to colonialism and imperialism in addition to gender, race, and class. Additionally, both Frances M. Beal’s 1969 “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” and the Combahee River Collective’s 1977 “A Black Feminist Statement” acknowledged the importance of gender as a category of analysis and maintained that it was not the primary category of oppression for Black women or

¹⁰ Gisela Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State,” *Signs* 8, no. 3 (1983): 400–21; reprinted as Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 271–96.

¹¹ After spending time as a visiting professor in Innsbruck last summer, I was impressed by its Center Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung Innsbruck (Center Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Innsbruck, CGI). Again, though, the center is a stand-alone one that deals with gender studies more broadly and not just gender history.

¹² Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!,” *Political Affairs* 28, no. 6 (1949): 51–67.

Women of Color in the United States.¹³ All this work has been both available and has proven influential to some scholars of Central Europe for decades.

With that, I do not believe Central European history is unique; its uniqueness manifests in other ways. In fact, I would argue that women historians of Central European history were at the forefront of these analyses, recognizing gender's importance and offering more holistic accounts by uncovering a variety of historical moments. Moreover, given its location as well as its multicultural and multiracial populations, scholars of Central European history have both intentionally and unintentionally hewed to international conventions, while also rejecting and complicating our understanding of the imbrication of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion, and class. They had to advance these studies, especially in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where the region called for understanding and tracing examples of the demarcation of differences across time and space.

Anita Kurimay

I would certainly agree that gender and more recently sexuality have become more firmly integrated into the historical scholarship on Central European history. As Tiffany Florvil notes above, gender history has deep roots, with an important group of “powerhouse scholars” focusing on Germany, but the past two decades also saw a robust growth in non-German speaking, East Central European scholarship. The number of books on histories of gender and sexuality published in English as well as in the various East Central European languages is a testament to this.¹⁴ Michał Wilczewski provides some highlights of these specific contributions of the scholarship below. To Susanne Korbel's point, from having a few panels at the major conferences on both sides of the Atlantic even a decade ago, these days panels on gender and more recently sexuality are plentiful at most conferences. With that said, I think gender and especially sexuality continue to remain untapped lenses within some of the more “traditional” political and economic histories of the region, especially in the East Central European languages (Slavic-based languages, Hungarian, Romanian, etc.).

While we now know a lot more of the histories of LGBTQ+ people, as well as histories of women and gender, there have been fewer attempts of using gender and sexuality to complicate dominant political and economic histories of Central Europe. In other words, while I think historians of gender and sexuality have paid attention to political and economic histories, the reverse has been less true. I think even just considering gender as an important category of analysis or variable for political and economic histories would provide new avenues of exploration and revisiting some of the accepted narratives. For instance, what would political and economic periodization of local, regional, and national histories look like from a gendered perspective?¹⁵ Just in trying to answer that question, I think it is clear we have a lot more opportunities for growth!

¹³ Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: New American Library, 1970 [1969]), 90–100. Initially, Beal wrote the pamphlet while serving as the New York Coordinator for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She also co-founded the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC) within SNCC to address both racism and sexism. See also “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017 [1977]), 15–28.

¹⁴ Two recent handbooks that showcase the richness of this scholarship include Katalin Fábián, Janet Elise Johnson, and Mara Lazda, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2022); and Agnieszka Kościańska et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Sexuality in East Central Europe* (London: Routledge, 2025).

¹⁵ See the foundational text by Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, ed. Joan Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19–51.

Alisha Rankin

Gender is a crucial lens for history in any time period and any place, and norms regarding biological difference and sexuality are central to practically every culture and its history. In that sense, Central Europe is not special. At the same time, there are some pivot points in Central European history in which gender and sexuality played a particularly important role. There are several such examples from my own time period and geography, the German-speaking regions of early modern Europe. The Protestant Reformation raised new questions about women's place in religious movements, and Luther made sexuality an explicit part of his argument for reform.¹⁶ Central Europe was also ground zero for the witch trials, in which themes of gender and sexuality took center stage.¹⁷

Even beyond these big-ticket events, there are some particularities to Central Europe that make the study of gender especially fruitful. My own work has focused on sixteenth-century aristocratic women who became known and lauded as healers, particularly for their pharmaceutical cures.¹⁸ Their story is not uniquely Central European, but the diffuse political map of the Holy Roman Empire created broad epistolary networks that made women's lives and efforts easier to track.¹⁹ Similarly, Central European, and especially Protestant, ideas of complementary balance between the sexes gave women some power in their own domains.²⁰ Finally, preservation practices since the sixteenth century have left a surprisingly rich documentation of women's lives in German archives. So, while it would be hard to say that Central Europe has a unique role to play in gender history, the region has been crucial to generating arguments for why gender is a "useful category of historical analysis," per Joan Wallach Scott, or "a vital and productive lens," as Susanne Korbel put it.²¹

Michał J. Wilczewski

If we look at the body of scholarship related to gender and sexuality in Central Europe in the last decade or so, I think it is safe to say that these are no longer niche topics, but now a necessary lens through which we need to understand our region. Every year, as I put together

¹⁶ Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals, in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, trans. Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017).

¹⁷ See Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994); Edward Bever, "Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community," *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 955–88; Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender, and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁸ Alisha Rankin, *Panacea's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Alisha Rankin, "The Housewife's Apothecary in Early Modern Austria: Wolfgang Helmhard von Hohberg's *Georgica Curiosa* (1682)," *Medicina & Storia* 15, no. 1 (2008): 59–78; Alisha Rankin, "Becoming an Expert Practitioner: Court Experimentalism and the Medical Skills of Anna of Saxony (1532–1585)," *Isis* 98, no. 1 (2007): 23–53; Alisha Rankin, "Exotic Materials and Treasured Knowledge: The Valuable Legacy of Noblewomen's Pharmacy in Early Modern Germany," *Renaissance Studies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 533–55.

¹⁹ See e.g., Dustin M. Neighbors and Natacha Klein Käfer, "Zones of Privacy in Letters Between Women of Power: Elizabeth I of England and Anna of Saxony," *Royal Studies Journal* 9, no. 1 (2022): 1; Pernille Arenfeldt, "Provenance and Embeddedness. The Letters from Elisabeth, Countess Palatine (1552–1590) to Anna, Electress of Saxony (1532–1585)," in *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources* (EUI Working Paper HEC No. 2004/2), ed. Regina Schulte and Xenia von Tippelskirch (Florence: European University Institute, 2004) (<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/2600/HEC04-02.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>).

²⁰ Heide Wunder, *He Is the Sun, She Is the Moon: Women in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Karin Gottschalk, ed., *Gender Difference in European Legal Cultures: Historical Perspectives: Essays Presented to Heide Wunder* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013).

²¹ Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis."

my syllabi for courses on gender and sexuality, I am struck by the dynamism of the field in Central European and East Central European history. This speaks, no doubt, to the tremendous work being done by so many incredible scholars: Katya Motyl, Kamil Karczewski, Dan Healey, Mark Cornwall, Keely Stauter-Halsted, Iris Rachamimov, Małgorzata Fidelis, Anita Kurimay, Agnieszka Kościańska, Mathias Foit, Anna Dobrowolska, Natalia Jarska, Nancy Wingfield, Michaela Appeltová, Katarzyna Person, Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, Dobrochna Kałwa, Anna Hájková, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz ... the list goes on. The work of these historians alone—focusing on homosexuality, new interpretations of the new woman, trans subjectivity, sex work and sexual barter, the sexual revolution behind the Iron Curtain, the role of specialists in gender and sexuality—showcases the enormous breadth of the field. Their work also offers new arrays of methodological innovations available to those of us who study gender and sexuality, for the study of Central Europe and beyond. The intersectionality of this work—focusing as it does on race, gender, class, and nation—is another important contribution of their scholarship. Still, as Tiffany Florvil and Sojna Dolinsek point out later in this forum, there is much work to be done on the relationship between gender and race and ethnicity.

Central Europe, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, experienced enormous volatility and the time is right for us to start thinking about the centrality of gender to those volatile moments: total war, the transition from empire to nation-state, the advent of modernity, mass urbanization, life under totalitarian regimes, and mass death, to name a few. Belinda Davis and Maureen Healy have shown how ordinary women wielded enormous power against their respective states with tremendous success in their books on everyday life in Berlin and Vienna.²² Katya Motyl has proven that it is important to look at women's embodied practices to understand their relationship to the city and their own modernity.²³ Keely Stauter-Halsted has demonstrated just how central the policing of gender and sexuality was to nation-building.²⁴ Anna Hájková has asked us to consider how we might queer the history of the Holocaust.²⁵ The transition from empire to nation-state was something that I tried to understand in my work on rural women, thinking about how Polish farmwives understood their place in the new Polish nation-state that arose after WWI. To uncover these stories I approach this from the level of everyday life—thinking about small units, and small moves: what women grew in their kitchen gardens, and the agricultural classes they took in food preparation and childrearing. In doing so, I have tried to feminize rural studies, which at least in Polish historiography has remained up until recently largely the story of men.²⁶

Beyond the pathbreaking scholarship our colleagues are producing, I think it is also important for us to remind ourselves that we study a part of the world that gave us the field of sexuality studies. The work of early sexologists in German-speaking lands introduced

²² Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²³ Katya Motyl, *Embodied Histories: New Womanhood in Vienna, 1894–1934* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).

²⁴ Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

²⁵ Anna Hájková, *People without History are Dust: Queer Desire in the Holocaust*, trans. William Ross Jones (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2025).

²⁶ See my chapter, Michał J. Wilczewski, "Nurturing the Nation: Farmwives and the (Home)Making of the Modern Polish Countryside, 1918–1939" in *Gender and Nation in East Central Europe: An Uneasy History*, ed. Marta Cieślak and Anna Müller (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), 273–303. Other excellent work on rural Polish women that has redefined the contours of rural studies in Polish historiography include Antonina Tosiek, *Przepraszam za brzydkie pismo: Pamiętniki wiejskich kobiet* (Sękowa: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2025) and Joanna Kuciel-Frydyszak, *Chłopki: Opowieść o naszych babciach* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Marginesy, 2024).

these new concepts the world over and gave us a language and vocabulary, for better or for worse, to address the various issues that each of us pursues in our intellectual work. Indeed, the progressivism of these early ideas sets our region apart from the “rest” of Europe, and we might remind ourselves that Soviet Russia and Poland decriminalized homosexuality well before other European countries. It seems, then, that Central and Eastern Europe are not the social and cultural backwater that some scholars still think it to be. Still, we might also consider what it means for us to be a part of this intellectual trajectory and lineage. For that matter, what intellectual baggage do we bring as a result of this legacy? And now, as we watch the region that gave us the language of sexuality also works to dismantle it—through right-wing East Central European political parties like Poland’s PiS (Law and Justice party), Hungary’s Fidesz (Civic Alliance party), Germany’s AfD (Alternativ für Deutschland party), and others too—what might our role as scholars of gender and sexuality be? How might the historical memory of sexual liberty be leveraged in current struggles with repressive political systems? What can or should we do in and for this region to persevere through these political entanglements?

Politics—global, regional, local—have made gender a prime battlefield in how people are being encouraged to think about values, economics, and community belonging. What do you see as the role of studying gender in Central Europe in responding to these phenomena? Do you think gender history contributes to writing new histories connecting the regional and local with the global? Does the vagueness of the region “Central Europe” play any part in this within your research?

Sonja Dolinsek

Coming from transnational and global history, I approach “Central Europe” as a space of transfers, connections, and jurisdictional frictions, as well as of projections, imaginaries, and dreams. This is evident in transnational histories of commercial sex, where national frames fail to capture lived experiences or the categories imposed on individuals—categories shaped as much by cross-border coordination as by local and national politics. Campaigns against trafficking in the late nineteenth century and from the 1990s onwards are a case in point.²⁷ The study of Central Europe risks reproducing a Eurocentric perspective, yet its transnational entanglements reveal how supposedly “global” ideas are rooted in local contexts, thereby reflecting power relations and global discursive hierarchies. After 1945, a range of actors produced “trafficking” and “prostitution” as objects of knowledge, control, and policing, linking them to border regimes, migration, welfare, and sexual politics. Global gender history demands a sustained engagement between the local and the global.²⁸ Migrant sex work, in particular, offers a key lens into the colonial and post-colonial

²⁷ See for instance, David Petrucci, “Pimps, Prostitutes and Policewomen: The Polish Women Police and the International Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children between the World Wars,” *Contemporary European History* 24, no. 3 (2015): 333–50; Keely Stauter-Halsted, “‘A Generation of Monsters’: Jews, Prostitution, and Racial Purity in the 1892 L’viv White Slavery Trial,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 38 (2007): 25–35; Nancy M. Wingfield, “Destination: Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Constantinople; ‘White Slavers’ in Late Imperial Austria,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 2 (2011): 291–311.

²⁸ On global histories of commercial sex and trafficking, see Eileen Boris and Magaly Rodríguez García, “(In)Decent Work: Sex and the ILO,” *Journal of Women’s History* 33, no. 4 (2021): 194–221; Sandy F. Chang, “Intimate Itinerancy: Sex, Work, and Chinese Women in Colonial Malaya’s Brothel Economy, 1870s–1930s,” *Journal of Women’s History* 33, no. 4 (2021): 92–117; Sonja Dolinsek, “Gehandelte Frau oder unerwünschte Fremde? Zur Geschichte der Prostituierten als Migrantin (1950er–1980er),” *Ariadne. Forum für Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte* 71 (2017): 66–73; Anna Dobrowolska, “‘Everyone Dreams about Leaving’: Debates on Human Trafficking in State-Socialist Poland,” *Journal of Women’s History* 33, no. 4 (2021): 168–93; Liat Kozma, “Women’s Migration for Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East and North Africa,” *Journal of Women’s History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 93–113; Julia Laite, “Between Scylla and Charybdis: Women’s Labour Migration and Sex Trafficking in the Early Twentieth Century,” *International Review of*

history of Central Europe, through the movement of people who may or may not trade sex; who may or may not be labeled as such; and who may or may not end up in coercive state structures, such as public health supervision, migration detention, workhouses, or prisons. The post-colonial and post-socialist history of migrant sex workers in Central Europe remains unwritten. This is especially the case of people working in German and Austrian brothels, who were and are often imprisoned for violating migration laws.²⁹ These histories are (Central) European, yet they point beyond Europe.

This is where my interest in the state and its practices comes in. To some extent, global and transnational history, as well as gender history, have attempted to write histories that transcend the state, focusing on a wide range of actors and their agency. However, when examining history through the lens of commercial sex, the state is omnipresent. It is evident in lawmaking, policing, control, mobility management, the granting and denial of rights, and the determination of citizenship. As Eileen Boris said in her comment to a panel on sex trafficking years ago, histories of commercial sex and trafficking show us “how sex made the state.”³⁰ One could easily adapt this to read: “How gender made the state.” However, the state is central to this work not as a monolith, but as a network of infrastructures, including policing, welfare, public health, diplomacy, and knowledge production, each of which operates according to distinct logics, institutional priorities, and administrative cultures.³¹ An intersectional lens is necessary in exploring how these networks work: racialized and gendered practices of inclusion and exclusion shaped everyday struggles over belonging, as Florvil’s work shows. Global governance becomes legible in local files, and local practices influence global governance, as knowledge flows back “up” into transnational networks, spaces, and problem definitions. This raises questions of agency. How do individuals navigate and resist? How are they shaped by these structures—within, beyond, and across the state?

In the current political climate, it is essential for students and researchers alike to understand how states and state actors have historically exercised power, how they sought to secure a cis-gendered, heteronormative, and often white social order—even when unsuccessful. It is through the study of state institutions and their practices that students can grasp the mechanisms of power and prepare for an uncertain future.

Tiffany N. Florvil

Excuse my informality, but it seems like a no-brainer that gender informs global, regional, and local politics at the macro and micro levels in different temporal and geographic borders. To this effect, individuals are interpellated at the everyday level to accept cis heteronormativity in schools, families, and broader society, and as a result, the fluidity and flexibility of gender are ignored or flattened, as evinced by President Donald Trump’s federal actions on gender in 2025 or the Alternative für Deutschland’s (AfD) anti-gender and homonationalist discourses. Interestingly, Dagmar Herzog’s most recent book unpacks AfD’s “sexy racism” and anti-disability stances.³² Studying these dynamics sheds light on

Social History 62, no. 1 (2017): 37–65; Julia Laite, “Traffickers and Pimps in the Era of White Slavery,” *Past & Present* 237, no. 1 (2017): 237–69.

²⁹ Dolinsek, “Gehandelte Frau oder unerwünschte Fremde?,” 66–73.

³⁰ Eileen Boris, discussant’s comment for the panel “Trafficking Problems: The Construction of the International Regulatory Regime to Fight Sex Trafficking,” Twelfth European Social Science History Conference, Queen’s University, Belfast, April 4–7, 2018.

³¹ Peter Becker, “Der moderne Staat und Staatsbildung: kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven,” in *Beschreiben und Vermessen: Raumwissen in der östlichen Habsburgermonarchie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Reinhard Johler and Josef Wolf (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2020), 31–58.

³² Dagmar Herzog, *The New Fascist Body* (Berlin: Wirklichkeit Books, 2025).

the changing contours of gender norms, relations, identities, subjectivities, and practices. Yes, gender relations are contingent upon power, and as Michel Foucault long contended, “knowledge is power.” It is not an accident that his 1970s and 1980s volumes on *The History of Sexuality* proved so significant.³³ Therefore, gender is not timeless, natural, neutral, or additive. As an analytic, gender constitutes, challenges, and affirms a variety of socio-political and cultural forms across place and space. Here, I agree with Anita Kurimay’s assertion above that “considering gender as an important category of analysis or variable for political and economic histories would provide new avenues of exploration and revisiting some of the accepted narratives.” Moreover, throughout the years, Central Europe’s geographically shifting meanings have only added complexity to what belonging and unbelonging mean and how different nation-states organized citizenship along gendered, classed, religious, and racialized lines. So, Sonja Dolinsek is right that these works show us “how gender made the state.”

Although the West and East German states’ lack of due diligence in enforcing their antiracist and gender equitable articles and clauses in the Basic Law of 1949 plays a role, it is not central to my work per se.³⁴ In my scholarship, I examine Black Germans’ responses to the state’s indifference at the local and federal levels as well as the European Union’s limited response to racism and “the crisis” of migration in the 1980s and 1990s. I specifically write on the gender and sexuality of Black Germans in the twentieth-century West, whose values, backgrounds, and community building embodied the interplay of the regional and local with the global. Black Germans used their mobility and ability to cultivate transnational connections to build networks and movements and to survive in majority-white West and East German societies. These African/Black diasporic communities force me to reckon with the idea that the global did not always necessitate travel beyond Germany. This work also impels me to recognize that Black Germans and Black Europeans were never monolithic.

Lastly, one of my main interests is politics in the quotidian or what was referred to as *Alltagsgeschichte* in the 1980s.³⁵ I analyze this history from and/or of below by researching minoritized communities of African descent in Germany and German-speaking regions. This focus on the quotidian enables me to show how the translocal and the transnational shaped Black Germans’ identities, practices, politics, community building, and much more. Thus, the vagueness of the region is less of a concern because Black Germans forged ties with their diasporic kin across the region. In fact, Black Germans’ connections to others (in Austria, Switzerland, Namibia, Tanzania) illustrate the porosity of Central European borders.

Anita Kurimay

I am writing this on the day after the new post-Orbán Hungarian government was formed, and I cannot help but feel optimistic about the role that the discipline of history could play

³³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans., Robert Hurley (original 1976; translated New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) and Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure Volume 2: The History of Sexuality*, trans., Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1985]).

³⁴ Alexandria N. Ruble, *Entangled Emancipation: Women’s Rights in Cold War Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023).

³⁵ See Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1989); and Alf Lüdtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, trans. William Templer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). For more modern approaches to *Alltagsgeschichte*, see Jennifer Allen, *Sustainable Utopias: The Art and Politics of Hope in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022) and Tiffany N. Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

in fostering an engaged collective that believes in democracy and a more inclusive society.³⁶ We know how gender and sexuality can be weaponized to aid radical right-wing populist politics, but I do believe that the Hungarian case shows us how spotlighting that LGBTQ+ people have always been part of Hungarian history—in direct contradiction of the false notions that LGBTQ+ people arrived in East Central Europe on the wings of western liberal democracy and capitalism—proved important in reclaiming gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights as central elements of a more inclusive belonging.

As Tiffany Florvil eloquently spells out above, gender and sexual politics shape our lives in fundamental ways. This was true even before they became explicitly politicized over the past two decades in the hands of illiberal right-wing populist parties like Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's PiS. We have burgeoning scholarship on East Central Europe that showcases how past political systems of our region interacted with ideas of gender and sexuality to construct who could belong in national communities.³⁷ While heteronormative patriarchal ideas have been—like in most places—central in determining belonging, there were also times when inclusion within national community was reframed around more inclusive gender and sexual politics, as I have shown in my own work in the context of Hungary, Kateřina Lišková illustrated in the context of state socialist Czechoslovakia, and Kamil Karczewski noted in the context of Poland.³⁸ As historians we are trained to refrain from generalizations, but I am going to do it nonetheless. I think the contribution of East Central European gender scholars is that they write histories that on the one hand historicize how social and cultural norms around gender and sexuality were formed and institutionalized, while on the other hand they illuminate the ways in which people of all genders and sexual orientations have navigated and contested norms throughout constantly fluctuating political systems, from multinational empires to liberal nation-states to fascist puppet or occupied states, from communist nation-states to post-socialist/ neo-liberal nation-states, from EU liberal nation-states to sites of growing conservative, authoritarian populism. In so doing gender historians and their scholarship play an important role in problematizing the mythical heteronormative patriarchal past for a more general audience. Their work inherently inspires empathy towards difference and a willingness to engage with the new and the unfamiliar in our present day.

I think if we have learned anything in the digital and social media age, it is how connected the world has become and how easily ideas of all sorts from one place could be applied in a different place. Of course, as historians we have studied and seen how such worldly connections are far from new. As historians of Central Europe have illustrated, and to which many within this forum have alluded, the region has been historically a laboratory of different ideas from East and West.³⁹ So historicizing the ways in which ideas about gender and sexuality and their regulation circulated and were implemented in different historical times

³⁶ After sixteen years in power, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Hungarian Civic Alliance party was ousted in the parliamentary elections in April 2026, when Péter Magyar's Tisza party received over two-thirds of the votes.

³⁷ For the latest work see the edited volume by Marta Cieślak and Anna Müller, *Gender and Nation in East Central Europe: An Uneasy History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

³⁸ Anita Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020); Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Kamil Karczewski, "Transnational Flows of Knowledge and the Legalisation of Homosexuality in Interwar Poland," *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 3 (2022): 1–18.

³⁹ See the special issue on "Sexual Expertise in Europe's East" in *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 3 (2024): 815–866. In addition, Agnieszka Koscińska has made crucial contributions in this regard. See for instance, "Sex on Equal Terms? Polish Sexology on Women's Emancipation and 'Good Sex' from the 1970s to the Present," *Sexualities* 19, nos. 1–2 (2016): 236–56.

in Central Europe absolutely serves as case studies that de-center national histories in general. They also provide added focus on how transnational ideas played out on a regional or even local level.

In closing, I would like to circle back to my optimism about Hungary and highlight the role of gender scholars, such as Hadley Renkin and Andrea Pető. These scholars worked tirelessly at debunking right-wing populist myths about the dangers of both “gender ideology” and LGBTQ+ rights.⁴⁰ There were obviously many other factors at play in the defeat of Victor Orbán, but by theorizing and demonstrating how anti-LGBTQ+ and gender discriminatory policies and rhetoric were weaponized in the hands of Fidesz scholars of gender and sexuality, they provided important insights to the pro-democracy opposition and myriad concerned Hungarian citizens. I hope that these scholars’ success can be replicated elsewhere.

Alisha Rankin

I very much appreciate Tiffany Florvil’s point above that “gender isn’t timeless, natural, neutral, or additive.” At the same time, I do think there is value in using past examples of people wrestling with questions of gender to help illuminate our present discussions. I teach a class on gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and students are always surprised by how resonant many of the readings are with their twenty-first-century experiences.

For example, there has long been an interest among early modernists in abortion and the “policing” of women’s bodies. Ulinka Rublack wrote an essay on that topic in 1996 for an edited volume on *Gender Relations in German History*.⁴¹ In the last few years, Mary Fissell and Kathleen Crowther have each published a book on abortion and the wide-ranging attempts to control female bodies over the longue durée.⁴² Neither of these books focus solely on Central Europe, but German examples form important case studies. My students read Crowther’s *Policing Pregnant Bodies* the last time I taught my class, and they were shocked by how “modern” some of the medieval and early modern discussions seemed. Together, these works (and many others) demonstrate the importance of “deep history” when studying gender—the hyped-up conversations in the current climate have long historical pasts. Per Florvil’s point, however, it is also important to tease out the significant differences between “then” and “now” and not to flatten historical timeframes or essentialize problems and concepts. At least in the early modern period, most politically charged questions of gender were pan-European. Central Europe always provided important examples but was far from alone in most instances.

Michał J. Wilczewski

Two years ago, I co-taught a course on homosexuality in Central and Eastern Europe, and it attracted a number of Polish-American students, many of whom come from relatively

⁴⁰ Andrea Pető, “‘Anti-gender’ Mobilisational Discourse of Conservative and Far Right Parties as a Challenge for Progressive Politics,” in *Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-gender Mobilization in Europe*, ed. Eszter Kovács and Maari Pöim (Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2015), 126–131; Hadley Z. Renkin, “‘Far from the Space of Tolerance’: Hungary and the Biopolitical Geotemporality of Postsocialist Homophobia,” *Sexuality & Culture* 27, no. 6 (2023): 2084–104.

⁴¹ Ulinka Rublack, “The Public Body: Policing Abortion in Early Modern Germany,” in *Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency, and Experience from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth Harvey (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 57–79.

⁴² Mary Elizabeth Fissell, *Pushback: The 2,500-Year Fight to Thwart Women by Restricting Abortion* (New York: Seal Press, 2025); Kathleen M. Crowther, *Policing Pregnant Bodies: From Ancient Greece to Post-Roe America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023)

conservative households. During one class, a student pulled me aside and told me that one of the reasons she was struggling with the material was not necessarily because it was difficult, but because she was “unlearning” so much of what she had been taught throughout her life. This concept of “unlearning” has become now my battle cry for what I want to happen in the classroom and precisely what makes studying gender and sexuality so important to our current political situation. As we all “unlearn,” we threaten the same power structures that seek to regulate us.

The geographic question is an interesting one in the Polish context, I think in part because many of the debates about gender and sexuality are couched in questions of Polish sovereignty and national culture versus some sort of foreign imposition—oftentimes equated with Germany. It is no surprise that in Poland, gender and sexuality have been part of a roaring public debate for over a decade. In fact, in 2013, gender was Poland’s “word of the year” and hysteria around gender was so great that a little girl named Marianna came home from school one day and asked her mother if she was “vaccinated against gender,” as one newspaper reported.⁴³ On December 29, 2013, priests were instructed to read a letter from Poland’s bishops demonizing “gender ideology” during Sunday mass.⁴⁴ One bishop even claimed that “the ideology of gender presents a threat worse than Nazism and Communism combined.”⁴⁵ Part of the Polish episcopate’s claim was that gender was a German imposition and that it was imperative to reject this foreign attempt at controlling Polish culture. This moral panic was often wrapped up in national terms. The looming threat of so-called “gender ideology” was a matter of national sovereignty. In 2026, these debates are still raging. After the European Court of Justice ruled that no EU member states can refuse to recognize same-sex marriages conducted in other parts of the bloc, Polish activists once again claimed that Poland was losing its sovereignty vis-à-vis the European Union.

Maybe we might want to rethink the utility of moral panic as a category of analysis. Frequently, we read the history of gender and sexuality through this lens. That is due in large part because the sources we can access are usually from both historic and contemporary vocal opponents of “gender ideology” i.e., morally panicked activists and social commentators. One of the questions I am currently working through in my own research on pornography in early twentieth-century Poland is “How can we understand desire rather than panic?” That is, the panicked were reacting to what was probably a more powerful desire for sexual exploration. Thinking of desire as the norm, rather than as a taboo, might help us unlearn the panic we associate with gender and sexuality.

Of course, these issues are not specific to Poland or Central Europe. In the United States, colleagues in some states are facing restrictions on how and what they can teach about gender, race, and DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) in general. It has now reached the level of absurdity—a sad dark comedy—that even Plato is being taken off college syllabi, while gender studies programs are being shuttered.⁴⁶ If anything, I feel more emboldened than

⁴³ Justyna Suhecka, “Mamo, czy jestem zaszczepiona na gender?” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 10, 2013 (<https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,15112785,mamo-czy-jestem-zaszczepiona-na-gender.html>).

⁴⁴ “List pasterski na Niedzielę Świętej Rodziny—29.12.2013” (https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/swrodziny_29122013.html).

⁴⁵ Sławomir Sierakowski, “The Polish Church’s Gender Problem,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2014 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/opinion/sierakowski-the-polish-churchs-gender-problem.html>).

⁴⁶ Alan Blinder, “Texas A&M, Under New Curriculum Limits, Warns Professor Not to Teach Plato,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2026 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/us/tamu-plato-race-gender.html>) and Kathryn Palmer, “Texas A&M Women’s and Gender Studies Programs,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 30, 2026 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/academic-programs/2026/01/30/texas-am-closes-womens-and-gender-studies>).

ever to continue with this work, and we owe it to our colleagues to stand up in support of them.

Women's history, masculinity studies, queer history, LGBTQ+ history, trans history, intersectional history: gender history includes within it so many lenses and so many experiences to be explored and understood more deeply. Do you feel like your work is fed or cornered by all the different angles which gender history now encapsulates? Do you feel that translating these differences in subject matter and approach requires different methods when writing or speaking with North American and Central European audiences?

Sonja Dolinsek

Although histories of sex work can be situated within women's history, masculinity studies, queer history, trans history and intersectional history, they rarely fit neatly into the way these subfields have been organized. Dominique Reill's introductory example above points to a similar methodological problem. Archival traces of "prostitution" rarely map onto commercial sex as we define it today. They can tell histories of intimacy, survival, work, violence, stigma, mobility, policing, self-fashioning, and social belonging. However, sex work is often narrated through the narrow binary of cisgender women providing sexual services to cisgender heterosexual men—both in sources and in most historical research. Even as historians of commercial sex have read the historical record against and along the grain, especially to recover the voices, the agency, and the experience of sex workers, these sources can tell many stories going beyond commercial sex. Unfortunately, present-day debates about consent, choice, and coercion, and conceptual debates about "sex work" or "prostitution" often overshadow other lenses through which commercial sex can be studied and how historical sources offer much richer material than these rather narrow questions may suggest. Historically, sex workers were often portrayed as deviants alongside lesbian women, and yet, this connection is rarely explored. Even if applying both terms to past actors may be an anachronism, I would argue that sex workers were often queer; in the age of self-organizing, they moved in and out of queer, feminist, and other activist communities.⁴⁷ The challenge lies in integrating these histories and reinterpreting sources and scholarship to craft inclusive histories of commercial sex in which sex workers are seen as community members with lives and identities beyond their work and the label of "prostitute" or "sex worker." The problem of categories being forced onto past actors is similar to Rankin's discussion below of pre-modern categories of bodily difference and sexuality. At the same time, the category of "identity" complicates the intersection of histories of sex workers with histories of queer people and queer and feminist activism. Selling sex is not an identity like gender or sexual orientation, which further complicates the inclusion of sex work histories in other histories. Sex work is often omitted from histories in which sex workers could and should have a place. Consequently, it remains compartmentalized as a separate social domain and is silenced as a phenomenon that permeates society as a whole. I cannot say whether this is due to discomfort, respectability politics, the stigma of sex work, or simply a limited understanding of a topic that is indeed quite complex. For

⁴⁷ There have been studies connecting histories of commercial sex and queer histories. See for instance Bodie A. Ashton, "The Parallel Lives of Liddy Bacroff: Transgender (Pre)History and the Tyranny of the Archive in Twentieth-Century Germany," *German History* 42, no. 1 (2024): 79–100; Jens Dobler, "Unzucht und Kuppelei. Lesbenverfolgung im Nationalsozialismus," in *Homophobie und Devianz. Weibliche und männliche Homosexualität im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Insa Eschebach (Berlin, Metropolis Verlag, 2016), 53–62; Sonja Dolinsek and Annalisa Martin, *Beruf Sexarbeit: Quellen und Dokumente aus dem Nachlass von Marc-of-Frankfurt (2000–2015)* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025); Martin Lücke, *Männlichkeit in Unordnung: Homosexualität und männliche Prostitution in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2008).

me, the question is as much about how sex work histories can attend to all these perspectives as it is about how sex work can be incorporated into all those other histories without threatening the legitimacy or respectability of the people we write about.

Tiffany N. Florvil

I recently finished a forum in *German History* specifically about new historiographical shifts in queer and LGBTQ+ history, and much like the other scholars in this *CEH* forum, I find these new developments in queer history extremely generative.⁴⁸ In that same forum, Lauren Stokes mentioned gaps, especially concerning bisexuality. Nevertheless, the critical work produced by scholars on queer Central European history, including Jennifer Evans, Christopher Ewing, Andrea Rottmann, Craig Griffiths, Lucie Fremlova, Fatima El-Tayeb, Anita Kurimay, Anna Hájková, Samuel Clowes Huneke, and others, has influenced me; Michał Wilczewski also referenced some of these scholars above.⁴⁹ Their work, among others, has advanced queer histories, marking important terrain for gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and “unsilencing the past.”⁵⁰ By being attentive to race and racism, Laurie Marhoefer’s work has been key in complicating our understanding of Magnus Hirschfeld, a well-known figure in this history. As Anita Kurimay also notes below, Marhoefer’s work sheds light on how racist, imperialist, and eugenic ideas coexisted with Hirschfeld’s progressive gendered and sexual politics, providing a more holistic exploration of who he was. Additionally, El-Tayeb and Evans have been critical in helping me in my examination of the everyday lives of minoritized communities of Color, who were queer and straight. I foreground their activism and diverse efforts at queering ethnicity, disidentification, world-making, and knowledge-making. It has been important for me to focus on queer histories of Color in both East and West Germany.⁵¹ Uncovering Black German queer narratives and queer practices helps me illuminate how this community advocated for themselves and other minoritized people by challenging postwar Germany’s myth of antiracism and its post-Cold War homonationalism. In a postwar context that included Germany’s division in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, my work proves that biological racism and cultural racism coexisted and never disappeared from the national polity (or the continent).

Unfortunately, there is still limited research on Black German queerness and/or the queerness of Germans of Color—while there are certainly some notable exceptions.⁵² As

⁴⁸ See Craig Griffiths, Nikolaos Papadogiannis, Bodie Ashton, Christopher Ewing, Tiffany N. Florvil, Benno Gammerl, Paola Medina-González, Lauren Stokes, Katie Sutton, and Sébastien Tremblay, “Forum New Directions in Queer and Trans* German History,” *German History* 44 (2026): 1–31.

⁴⁹ Jennifer Evans, *The Queer Art of History: Queer Kinship After Fascism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), Christopher Ewing, *The Color of Desire: Untangling the Queer Politics of Race and Sex in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023), Andrea Rottmann, *Queer Lives Across the Wall* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), Craig Griffiths, *The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation: Male Homosexual Politics in 1970s West Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), Lucie Fremlova, *Queer Roma* (New York: Routledge, 2021), Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961*, Anna Hájková, *Menschen ohne Geschichte sind Staub: Queeres Verlangen im Holocaust* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), and Samuel Clowes Huneke, *States of Liberation: Gay Men Between Dictatorship and Democracy in Cold War Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022). See also Huneke’s new book *I Will Not Abandon You: Queer Women in Nazi Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2026).

⁵⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015 [1995]).

⁵¹ El-Tayeb, *European Others*, José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁵² See, for instance, the work of Laurie Marhoefer, Jin Haritaworn, Javier Samper Vendrell, Fatima El-Tayeb, Peggy Piesche, Jennifer Wilson, Jennifer Evans, Benno Gammerl, and Christopher Ewing; these scholars focus on

a result, I have had to rely on Black Studies, Black Feminist Studies, and Black Queer Studies to find a language that helps me shed light on these neglected, silenced, suppressed, and erased narratives. The works of Fatima El-Tayeb, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Jennifer Nash, Michelle M. Wright, Hortense Spillers, Christina Sharpe, Cathy Cohen, Nadia Ellis, Rinaldo Walcott, Dionne Brand, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt have been invaluable and have given me a degree of fluency that I employ to recover these critical narratives.⁵³ I am not entirely sure if some of those Black Studies scholars read Central European studies in a similar fashion. I also must caution myself, though, not to apply concepts and theories onto Black Germans and Black Europeans that do not necessarily fit, and I must try to ensure that queer or queerness does not become so capacious within my own work that it loses its meaning or potency. Ultimately, my work cannot be concerned with all the different angles that constitute contemporary gender history, nor should it be. I also cannot uncover all the narratives of Black Germanness and Black Europeaness. I see my work as a springboard for others to pursue this work, which remains timely and necessary in a moment with a resurgence of global fascism and its insistence on restoring traditional gender roles and norms.

Anita Kurimay

I think the various lenses and different methodological approaches that historians of gender and sexuality use to uncover and write histories is what makes the history of gender and sexuality a particularly vibrant and innovative field. Inherently tied to the politics of archives, the innovative nature of the field and its expanding lenses keep me on my toes, so to speak. This field pushes me to see blind spots in my research and even consider asking different historical questions. I particularly admire Laurie Marhoefer's work in this regard, which shifts from writing macro histories to micro histories, and from thinking through lenses of gender and lesbianism to trans and transnational histories.⁵⁴

As Tiffany Florvil and Sonja Dolinsek note above, there are continuing gaps in thinking about gender, especially through race and ethnicity. In terms of East Central Europe, there has been less of a scholarship on ethnic minorities, while robust on the pre-WWII period, has been less of a focus in histories of socialist and post-socialist contexts, and this is particularly true

different aspects of queerness in Central and/or Eastern Europe. See also Soheil Asefi, "QPoc Solidarity in West Berlin in the 1980s: Survival as Struggle," *zeitgeschichte online*, August 9, 2023 (<https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/qpoc-solidarity-west-berlin-1980s>).

⁵³ El-Tayeb, *European Others*, Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]); June Jordan, "A New Politics of Sexuality" in *Some of Us Did Not Die*, ed. June Jordan (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 135–36; Jennifer C. Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2013): 1–24; Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65; Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Rinaldo Walcott, *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies* (London, Ontario: Insomniac Press, 2016); Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001; New York: Picador, 2024); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019); and Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photograph and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ Marhoefer's publications include *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); "Lesbianism, Transvestitism, and the Nazi State: A Microhistory of a Gestapo Investigation, 1939–1943," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 4 (2016): 1167–95; *Racism and the Making of Gay Rights: A Sexologist, His Student, and the Empire of Queer Love* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022); and "Transgender Life and Persecution under the Nazi State: Gutachten on the Vollbrecht Case," *Central European History* 56, no. 4 (2023): 595–601.

in the context of Roma minorities across East Central Europe.⁵⁵ At the same time, there are also efforts to fill those gaps. I teach at a liberal arts college without a graduate program, but I recently participated at a symposium on “Research, Teaching and Service in Illiberal Times” at Rutgers University, where I was blown away by the methodological ingenuity of today’s graduate students. Their interdisciplinary approaches incorporated queer and trans histories with histories of race, ethnicity, and class in a non-linear chronological sense. Such approaches are indicative of the continuing methodologically innovative nature of gender and sexuality scholars of the region.

Alisha Rankin

Although I work on aristocratic women, intersectional history has always been a crucial aspect of my own research, particularly the way gender intersects with class, age, and religious identity. In that sense, works from queer theory and LGBTQ+ history have made utter sense to me, even though you would not necessarily know that from my research focus. In my work on noblewomen healers, who seemed to transcend expectations of their gender, it was important to keep in mind that power dynamics tilted in their favor in many ways—they were far from subaltern. The more scholarship we have on how to think about gender and sexuality and the power dynamics involved, the more options it gives us for making sense of our own research.

Recent years have brought some very exciting research on LGBTQ+ history in pre-modern Europe that can help inform our present conversations. I would like to highlight in particular Leah DeVun’s work on nonbinary sexuality in medieval Europe, which belies the notion that sexual ambiguity is a product of modern woke ideologies. DeVun’s masterful and award-winning book, *The Shape of Sex*, demonstrates convincingly that intersex individuals were central to ideas on defining the “human.”⁵⁶ Not only did nonbinary individuals provide a foil that reified binary categories of male/female, strands of medieval Christian theology even posited Adam and Jesus as hermaphrodites.⁵⁷ DeVun also gives grim lessons on the harm caused by attempts to flatten out nonbinary gender, in particular efforts by fifteenth-century surgeons to “correct” intersex genitalia, usually to make it masculine.⁵⁸ While the specific discourses were much different than today’s debates, they still show a longstanding interest in nonbinary sexuality as an epistemological and social category. Similarly, Helmut Puff’s work on “female sodomy” in medieval and early modern Germany demonstrates a completely different understanding of same-sex sexuality than our modern categories.⁵⁹ These ideas have been extremely generative for my students to wrestle with, and they have helped inform my own approach to thinking about early modern gender categories.

Michał J. Wilczewski

My research into pornography in Poland has been influenced by my professional trajectory, specifically because I was trained as a historian but am part of the Department of Slavic

⁵⁵ There are notable exceptions, see the work of Eszter Bartha and Eszter Varsa.

⁵⁶ Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

⁵⁷ DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, chap. 6; Leah DeVun, “The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 193–218.

⁵⁸ DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, chap. 5; Leah DeVun, “Erecting Sex: Hermaphrodites and the Medieval Science of Surgery,” *Osiris* 30, no. 1 (2015): 17–37.

⁵⁹ Helmut Puff, “Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477),” *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 41–62; Helmut Puff, *Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland, 1400–1600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Languages and Literatures. This has helped me consider new interdisciplinary aspects of my work that I likely would not have thought about before. Many of my sources now are literary—seemingly “pornographic” short stories and novels—and I find myself thinking more about literary analysis in my historical work. Studying pornography (which is often impossible to define) helps us uncover so much about people’s sexualities. In my own work, I let my interlocutors define what they considered pornographic, and so I have come to embrace novels, humor magazines, cabaret songs and performances, postcards, etc., as potentially pornographic materials—the breadth of this source base lends itself to being analyzed by all of the various angles that fall under the category of gender history. For example, we can study men’s crisis of masculinity vis-à-vis their concerns about depictions of the new woman in films and songs, or look at how queer populations are imagined in bawdy publications, or analyze the male gaze toward the women they consume in lewd photographs or stories. As everyone else in this forum has mentioned, I have also found recent scholarship on queer history in the region tremendously informative. Anna Dobrowolska, for example, has called on us to queer heterosexual history and think more deeply about the construction of heterosexuality, much in the same way that we write about the construction of homosexuality.⁶⁰ For me, none of these intersectional angles takes away from my work, but only nourishes it.

Which historians inspired your own thinking on gender history when you were first starting to study this topic?

Sonja Dolinsek

A single main inspiration is difficult to pinpoint because I am an eclectic, interdisciplinary reader, and because my point of departure was global rather than regional. One of the first texts that steered me towards gender history and the history of sexuality was Ann Stoler’s “Making Empire Respectable.”⁶¹ My first encounter with my research topic happened in the anthropology and sociology classroom at Brown University. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas drew my attention to the different moral views sex workers have about their work, and Kay B. Warren had a lasting effect on my interest in international law and international organizations, with an ethnographic angle.⁶² Together, they prepared me to complicate international histories of trafficking and histories of sex work by bringing these together and by thinking across the local and the global.

When I first discovered “trafficking,” I went looking for a broad range of histories that seemed to offer some explanatory potential: histories of slavery and post-slavery, including Jim Crow; histories of unfree labor before and after legal reforms that promised change, yet often remained marked by continuities; and histories and social science studies of women’s labor migration. To understand my topic, I also drew on scholarship beyond the core historiography of sex work, with scholars like Judith R. Walkowitz having developed a broad range of methodological tools to approach histories of sexuality.⁶³ Like Michał Wilczewski below,

⁶⁰ Anna Dobrowolska, *Polish Sexual Revolutions: Negotiating Sexuality and Modernity behind the Iron Curtain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

⁶¹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634–60.

⁶² Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, eds., *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁶³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Judith R. Walkowitz, “The Politics of Prostitution and Sexual Labour,” *History Workshop Journal* 82, no. 1 (2016): 188–98; Judith R. Walkowitz, “The Idea of Sex Work,” *Radical History Review* 2024, no. 149 (2024): 81–110.

I consider Walkowitz's work fundamental to the history and historiography of commercial sex, especially for showing how state sources preserve intimate traces of marginalized lives when those lives become subjects of surveillance, regulation, and scandal. Alongside explicitly gender-centered work, I read work on social movements, especially women's and feminist movements, and on NGOs as actors that shaped agendas, problem definitions, and reform strategies. I engaged with histories of international organizations, humanitarianism, and human rights in order to trace how "trafficking" became a contested category of international governance, and how it was translated into national and local policy. Labor history and labor migration scholarship helped me situate commercial sex within broader histories of work, mobility, and coercion, while crime history and policing scholarship sharpened my sense of how states produced gender and sexual order through administrative and legal practices, often under the pressure of faith-based, women's, and feminist organizations that, when it came to commercial sex, called upon state intervention.

Reading in these fields sharpened my sense that legal change is complicated, even if it is presented as easy and straightforward. This is especially the case with contemporary prostitution debates. In histories of commercial sex, legal reform is often explored only up to the moment a law is passed, and this pattern is particularly evident in work on the so-called abolition of "state-regulated prostitution," where only recently historians, including myself, have begun to study commercial sex after the abolition of regulationism. Such histories have the potential to rethink gender histories across the Iron Curtain and to open up space for transnational perspectives in places where few scholars expected to find them, as in the case of sex tourism to socialist Hungary.⁶⁴ For me this shift helps avoid teleological histories of success and keeps focus on the tensions and contradictions that often follow reform promises in practice.

Tiffany N. Florvil

Like all the contributors to this forum, I read widely outside of my field. It is how I have been able to develop as an interdisciplinary scholar. To take it all the way back to my undergrad years, I became interested in gender through my reading of Women of Color and Black feminists such as bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman*, Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*, and other volumes.⁶⁵ At the time, I was also involved in human rights activism with my campus chapter of Amnesty International, which informed my interests. These works taught me about interlocking systems of oppression in the lives of minoritized communities in the United States. To be sure, this outside reading shaped my perspectives long before I read Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* or learned of Kimberlé Crenshaw's coinage of intersectionality.⁶⁶ Beyond feminist studies, I was also drawn to scholarship on the African/Black diaspora in the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean. My interest in the Caribbean was due to my upbringing with an immigrant Trinidadian mother from the Anglophone Caribbean; my father was from Haiti, the Francophone Caribbean. While I doubt my mother would have considered herself a feminist, I, nonetheless, saw Black feminism in action through her living example.

It was not until I entered grad school at UW-Madison's well-regarded program in Women and Gender History that I gained additional exposure to historians/scholars of women's and

⁶⁴ Priska Komaromi, "Buying Sex across the Iron Curtain: Western Men and Transactional Intimacy in State-Socialist Hungary during the Long 1960s," *Rethinking History* 29, no. 3 (2025): 537–63.

⁶⁵ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1981).

⁶⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

gender studies, such as Gisela Bock, Atina Grossmann, Lynn Hunt, Judith Surkis, Ann Stoler, Heidi Tinsman, Lora Wildenthal, Laura Wexler, and Joan Scott. Yet, I always wondered why I rarely saw myself reflected in the histories, readings, or theories in my (European) Women and Gender History courses. The few times that discussions of Black people or people of color emerged, they always remained outside the European metropole or in the colonies or “peripheries” (i.e., Mrinalini Sinha’s *Colonial Masculinity* and Ann Stoler’s *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*), or in relationship to Europeanness, whiteness, colonialism, and empire (i.e., Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and Antoniette Burton’s *Burdens of History*).⁶⁷ I was not introduced, for example, to the works and thoughts of Claudia Jones (Britain), Olive Morris (Britain), Paulette and Jeanne Nardal (France/Martinique), Suzanne Césaire (France/Martinique), Tilo Frey (Switzerland/Cameroon), or Gloria Wekker (the Netherlands/Suriname). Additionally, I was often the only Black person in my European history courses at UW-Madison and later at the University of South Carolina-Columbia, where I finished my PhD. Those experiences, which included implicit and explicit forms of racism from graduate student peers and professors, also shaped my interest in the African/Black diaspora in Europe. I consciously sought out those narratives, which felt non-normative or “queer” in comparison to the more traditional or standard narratives, and I taught myself about their theories, practices, and more.

Anita Kurimay

To Sonja Dolinsek’s point earlier about the crucial role conferences have (and continue to) play in fostering scholarship, I still vividly remember going to Lviv, Ukraine as a PhD student where Keely Stauter-Halsted and Nancy Wingfield organized a workshop on gender and sexuality in the Habsburg lands and its successor countries. Apart from their own scholarship, which was inspirational, the ways in which they cultivated a budding community of young scholars of gender and sexuality in Central Europe was foundational for me. In addition, Dan Healy and my own professors at Rutgers—particularly Paul Hanebrink, Melissa Feinberg, and Seth Koven—were key figures in shaping my thinking. Finally, Dagmar Herzog’s scholarship as well as teaching has and continues to inspire me.

Alisha Rankin

I was introduced to the topic of gender and sexuality during my senior year at Wellesley College, when I took Katharine Park’s research seminar on “The Female Body in Medieval and Early Modern Medicine.” I had always been interested in women’s history, but I somehow had not managed to take any classes on it to that point. This class blew my mind—the construction of gendered categories, the importance of women’s bodies as a topic for medical men—I found it all so fascinating. I ended up writing a research paper using Wolfgang Behringer’s collection of German archival sources on witchcraft, so it gave me the first small taste of the kind of sources I could find in early modern archives (without the hurdle of reading the *Kurrentschrift*, yet).

In graduate school, I was lucky enough to study under Park, who was in the process of writing her *Secrets of Women*.⁶⁸ Her entire oeuvre and her careful attention to sources was

⁶⁷ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), and Antoniette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

an enormous influence on me. I also eagerly read other historians who focused on gender in early modern Europe. Lyndal Roper (especially *The Holy Household* and *Oedipus and the Devil*) taught me that the lens of gender can completely change how we see major events in European history.⁶⁹ Merry Wiesner-Hanks' *Working Women in Early Modern Germany* helped me formulate specific contexts for my sixteenth-century German female healers, while Heide Wunder and Ulinka Rublack gave me a broader perspective on the landscape of early modern gender.⁷⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis (especially *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*) showed me how to tell women's stories from the archives.⁷¹ Monica Green's 1989 article "Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe" and her book of essays (which included an essay on women's medical reading and writing) helped set me on the path to my PhD topic.⁷²

Michał J. Wilczewski

I am sort of a latecomer to gender and sexuality studies. My dissertation was on the everyday lives of Polish farmers in the interwar period and like any good social history dissertation included a chapter on women and girls' activism (although it was not the focus of the study). My slightly later turn to gender and sexuality studies was influenced in part thanks to a graduate seminar taught by Leslie Page Moch at Michigan State University on gender and women's history, where I was introduced to so many scholars whose work has really proved formative in my own thinking. Of course, Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis" was a critical text, but I also remember devouring Judith Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.⁷³ I remember reading Walkowitz's book and finally understanding how we can tell the life stories of marginalized people from various state-driven sources. This idea of the state being interested in collecting such intimate data about ordinary people was also bolstered by Ann Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*.⁷⁴ I also, maybe providentially, started my graduate career just as my PhD advisor, Keely Stauter-Halsted, was in the throes of writing *The Devil's Chain*.⁷⁵ I was lucky to be her research assistant for that book one summer, which turned out to be my first foray into the archives regarding issues of gender and sexuality. I was spoiled in graduate school to work with two scholars of Poland who worked on gender issues and am also beholden to Małgorzata Fidelis's *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*.⁷⁶ Reading Angus McClaren's *The Trials of Masculinity* and Paul Lerner's *Hysterical Men* were also formative texts in my graduate years.⁷⁷ In my own work, I have become increasingly interested in masculinity studies and keep going back to McClaren and Lerner's work. Dan Healey's

⁶⁹ Roper, *The Holy Household*; and Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*.

⁷⁰ Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Wunder, *He is the Sun, She is the Moon*; Ulinka Rublack, *The Crimes of Women in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

⁷¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁷² Monica Green, "Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe," *Signs* 14, no. 2 (1989): 434–73.

⁷³ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

⁷⁴ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*.

⁷⁵ Stauter-Halsted, *The Devil's Chain*.

⁷⁶ Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷⁷ Angus McClaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia was both intellectually and personally transformative.⁷⁸ I would be remiss if I did not mention Belinda Davis's *Home Fires Burning* and Maureen Healy's *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* as texts that inspired me to study the history of everyday life and how gender and sexuality are part and parcel of the everyday experience of ordinary people.⁷⁹

What archival challenges have you faced in studying issues of gender and sexuality? Have archivists/institutions been the gatekeepers of national moralities who limit historians' access to certain types of sources in your experiences?

Sonja Dolinsek

Conducting research at the intersection of the “global” and the “local” presents many challenges. The practical obstacles are obvious: archival research takes time and money, particularly when there is little existing scholarship to help trace connections and disconnections. In terms of the archives themselves, there is often a discrepancy between what I know must have occurred in international and local practice, and what the catalogues allow me to locate. Despite working in archives with extensive holdings on local prostitution policy, I have encountered city archives whose catalogues contain no usable entry points, even in places where scandals and public debates indicate sustained administrative attention. It is unclear whether this is a problem of archival practice, where invisibility begins with cataloguing and tagging, or if there is a political agenda behind the lack of archival documents. I have also encountered, though not technically in Central Europe, archives in which the state (France!), notably the Ministry of the Interior, prevented me from accessing files on corrupt police officers relating to cases of commercial sex. Archivists can be extremely helpful, but often my experience was that I helped them discover something about their holdings.

Transnational research has taught me how differently archives work, and how much archival research depends on understanding institutions, bureaucracies, and organizations. I remember my first visit to the archive of the Auswärtiges Amt (German Federal Foreign Office) during the first months of preparing my project proposal. The archivist told me that I needed to understand the administrative and bureaucratic structure of the Auswärtiges Amt in order to find what I was looking for. This proved to be the best archival advice I have received. It helped me navigate collections whose files were rarely titled with “prostitution” and still find some precious needles in haystacks. Working across multiple archives has also shown me how different the archival traces of the same small event can be. One archive preserves correspondence. Another preserves marginal notes, reports, requests, or traces of internal disagreement. Yet another archive might preserve nothing at all or hide it in an unrelated subject file. Multi-archival research is therefore necessary not only to reconstruct several perspectives but also to retrieve a broader documentary record from which more inclusive and multi-perspectival histories can be written.

The greatest challenge in doing transnational and translocal archival research is not necessarily language (although it would be if I were to expand my regional interest to all of Central Europe), but seeing and grasping the heritage and traces of local fragmentation of the past, even as during the period I study, I look at fully formed nation-states. Accounting for local differences often goes beyond the scope of what can be done from the vantage point of global and transnational history, and yet, it might be essential in understanding why local actors act the way they do.

⁷⁸ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁷⁹ Davis, *Home Fires Burning*; and Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire*.

Tiffany N. Florvil

My archival path has been a little different than others. As conducting dissertation research in Germany revealed, there was limited information on the individuals I wanted to study from the 1980s and 1990s at traditional archives, such as the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. Archival silences abound and remain violent, as Alisha Rankin and others in this forum note. Archivists often responded to my German emails dismissively and tersely. As a Black woman studying Europe, traditional German archives were also not the most welcoming or open spaces. I often felt misunderstood and judged for researching Black Germans in the late twentieth century. At the few places that I felt comfortable (i.e. Freie Universität's University Archives), it changed how I viewed and understood my sources. Owing to those dynamics, I found my historical actors in subcultural archives like das feministische Archiv (FFBIZ), Spinnboden, and other libraries. I believe my most important accomplishment was cultivating connections to several Black German queer "quotidian intellectuals" (a term I coined and use throughout my work) in the Afro-German movement of the 1980s and 1990s. I am still in contact with several of them and am lucky to call them dear friends. These women often welcomed me and shared their personal materials. Once again, the everyday or quotidian was not only a methodology for me but also a practice and a form of community building.

In some ways, the field has changed since I first entered grad school in 2004—over twenty years ago—at UW-Madison. Black German and Black European Studies are recognized fields. I would also argue that these fields are institutionalized, evinced by international conferences in Europe and North America as well as through the development of ground-breaking supplementary learning spaces and curriculum interventions including the Black Europe Summer School (BESS) held annually in Amsterdam; the MA Program in Black British History at Goldsmiths University in London; the Intersectional Black European Studies project (InBest) sponsored by the Center for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the Technical University Berlin; the RAA Berlin; and Yale University's Center for Race, Indigeneity and Transnational Migration; as well as the Center for Black European Studies and the Atlantic at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.⁸⁰ There are also book series at Louisiana State University (LSU) Press founded and edited by Robin Mitchell, at Peter Lang Press founded and edited by Vanessa D. Plumly and me, and a new Cambridge University Press book series, "Histories of Black Europe," that I co-founded and co-edited with Kennetta Perry and Olivette Otele. In the past, there was a reluctance on the part of some scholars in "traditional" history departments to advise students' projects on the African/Black diaspora in Europe. I certainly felt and experienced pushback at UW-Madison but less so at the University of South Carolina. I hope this is ever less the case.

Finally, I mentioned in a 2024 forum in the *History of Intellectual Culture* that my PhD is not from a prominent institution that trained students in Central European history, and I work at a poor university in the Southwest United States that is also not well-known for (Central) European history.⁸¹ Initially, these experiences resulted in limited opportunities,

⁸⁰ Sadly, officials at Goldsmiths axed both the MA in Black British History and the MA in Queer History programs in 2024/2025. Similarly, the MA in Black Studies with Kehinde Andrews at Birmingham City University will be cut this year, much like how officials terminated Hakim Adi's first online MRes in the History of Africa and the African Diaspora at the University of Chichester in 2023. Unfortunately, this dynamic is also reflected in the USA with similar programs terminated at University of Texas-Austin, the University of Iowa, and other institutions as of May 2026. For more on this, see Jafari Allen, "The Dismantling of Black Studies," *The Nation*, May 18, 2026 (<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/black-studies-freedom-democracy/>).

⁸¹ Jana Weiß, ed., with Tiffany N. Florvil, Madalitso Zililo Phiri, and Vanessa D. Plumly, "Interrogating Epistemologies: Decolonizing Knowledge in Academia and Beyond," *History of Intellectual Culture* 2024, no. 3 (2024): 295–322.

especially in terms of acquiring external funding for my first monograph, *Mobilizing Black Germany*.⁸² While dealing with lots of rejections is par for the course in academia, my rejections were also coupled with incredulity about the importance of Black German history and the viability of my topic on Black German women's activism in the 1980s and 1990s. Similar dynamics also emerged at conferences when I presented on the topic. In fact, there are still some who believe my research area is just a trendy fad that is not truly Central European history.

So, some Europeanists have certainly made it difficult for me, but so have some in the Black German community who do not approve of my work based on my positionality as a Black diasporic scholar from the United States. Some believe that my work on the prominent Black German activist and poet May Ayim, in particular, is inaccurate and misguided, and that I should let Black Germans offer their own perspectives on her. To them I say, I do not feel that I possess Ayim (or her narratives), and I have never expressed a desire to be the only one who writes about her. In fact, I have always stressed the importance of multiple scholars (on both sides of the Atlantic) working on her and exploring how her work changed the lives around her as well as the lives who have followed her. This is all to say that my entire grad school experience and its aftermath have not been a pain-free path. But these experiences have only reinforced my tenacity and resolve.

Anita Kurimay

As everyone else in this forum remarked, there are many hurdles that exist for historians of gender and sexuality thanks to the silences and politics of archiving. I still vividly remember when I was doing research on queer history for my dissertation, neither category existed within the system of organizing sources about the past. What I encountered was a host of silences that surrounded homo and queer sexuality in most of the archives I visited. Of course, a lot has changed, especially thanks to the rapid digitalization of archives (a big shout out to the [Arcanum](#) who has been a pioneer in digitizing and making searchable databases). Nonetheless, I would just like to make a distinction between archivists and institutions. While I have found that both of them have been gatekeepers of national moralities (or perhaps it is more accurate to say they have been gatekeepers of historical *imagination* of gendered and sexual moralities), archivists (unlike institutions) have been also crucial in dismantling such imagination by helping to navigate the workings of institutional archival barriers and red tape. Before the digitalization of archival materials, archivists held the key to major historical discoveries. That was certainly the case for me, and I am forever grateful for their support. Cultivating good relationships with archivists has been not only useful, it has also proven generative in terms of thinking about future historical projects. I just hope that with digitalization, we do not lose these essential archivists who can help navigate the collections, as I experienced.

At the same I also want to acknowledge the increasingly limited funding opportunities for research and getting to the archives in Central Europe, a problem especially besetting new and emerging scholars who are based outside of Europe. In addition to general cuts to humanities research funds, the reality is that using words such as gender, sexuality, or race in countries like the United States could automatically disqualify one's application for federal grant opportunities. Thus, the continuing scholarship on gender and sexuality histories of Central and East Central Europe speaks to the tenacity and resourcefulness of scholars, not to structural support or encouragement.

⁸² Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany*.

Alisha Rankin

My archival struggles have come from silences more than categories. What was deemed worth saving from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women is haphazard—sometimes extensive, sometimes empty. My very first archival foray, at the Hessian State Archives in Marburg, yielded a bonanza of letters from one of the noblewomen I was studying, and the archivists there were very patient with my somewhat clueless questions. In Heidelberg, Matthias Miller and Karin Zimmerman happened to be running a major research project on medical manuscripts, and they were instrumental to helping me find female voices that I might have overlooked otherwise. In other cases, I was not so lucky, and entire archives had been destroyed (sometimes as far back as the Thirty Years War). In Dresden, where the archives are generally phenomenal, I became acquainted with the word *Kriegsverlust*, or “lost due to war.” Nonetheless, with time, I learned that women often show up in places we do not expect—for example, the boxes in the archive in the Vienna Staatsarchiv labeled *Ärzte und Arzneiprivilegien* (Doctors and Medical Licenses) contain a ton of information on women practitioners and patients. In my experience, finding gender history in the archives requires a lot of patience and a little bit of luck.

Michał J. Wilczewski

Like many of us who study gender and sexuality, I find that the biggest challenge is that there is little saved by traditional state and university archives on such topics. In my own experience, when I explain to archivists that I am working on pornography, they tell me to study prostitution instead. Part of this is because of the way that pornography and prostitution were connected historically, but also because of the organizational structure of archival collections. I have yet to be barred from seeing any materials I have requested (though I know other colleagues have had their requests subject to special scrutiny), but the glances from others sitting nearby in the archives are telling.

The most pushback I have faced regarding my research has come from some who have questioned why I would choose to study the “bad parts” of Polish history instead of telling the story of Poland’s exceptionalism. One even cautioned me to “only teach good Polish history.” This all goes back to my point about moral panic above—if we flip the script and think about desire, then we see that none of the issues surrounding gender and sexuality are taboo and “bad” (for lack of a better word), but rather ubiquitous and commonplace.

Detour from the Periphery to the Center: Explorations of Gender and Sexuality in East Central Europe. Epilogue by Jill Massino

As the contributors here eloquently demonstrate, approaching East Central Europe through the frames of gender and sexuality not only transforms how we understand its history and people, but also how we understand European history and even global events. This is evident in the wealth of pathbreaking work that has been produced over the past several decades, along with conferences, workshops, and the publication of two major handbooks: *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* and the *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality in East Central Europe*.⁸³ Perhaps the most crucial point here, one with which most—if not all—scholars of the East are abundantly familiar, is that East Central Europe can hold its own. The communities located between the Rhine and the Ural Rivers need not be defined in relation to Western Europe, and scholars should not feel compelled to reference Western Europe to justify the significance or relevance of work on East Central

⁸³ Fábíán, Johnson, and Lazda, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*; and Agnieszka Kościńska et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Sexuality in East Central Europe* (London: Routledge).

Europe, or Southeastern Europe, for that matter. (I am a scholar of Romania, after all, so I must plug that region.)

Indeed, in certain instances, East Central Europe was ahead of the West. The region's policies and practices around gender, women, and sexuality have been far more diverse (and sometimes progressive) than clichés about its backwardness would have us believe. Just a few examples to elucidate: Abortion was legalized in much of the region (except for East Germany) by socialist regimes well before such legislation was enacted in many liberal democracies in the West. Women in said socialist dictatorships were granted full legal equality with men, not to mention opportunities for economic autonomy, which their counterparts in several states in the West did not enjoy. And as Michał Wilczewski notes, while most countries in Europe criminalized homosexuality, similarly repressive legislation was not enacted in Poland. Perhaps most remarkably, starting in the mid-1960s transsexual individuals in Poland could legally change their assigned gender by amending their birth certificates, and the state not only paid for reassignment surgery, but also provided counselling services during the transitioning process.⁸⁴ I would like us to greet such findings not with astonishment, but rather as further evidence of the progressiveness of the region. East Central Europe could be an innovator, not just an imitator; in the area of gender and sexuality it was not perennially on the periphery but often at the center. This does not mean eschewing comparative analyses of East and West or minimizing cross-fertilizations between the two regions; indeed, it is through such investigations that we have been able to flip the traditional script and produce more nuanced historiographies. As the contributors to this forum show, it means that we as scholars and educators need to continue pushing back against notions of the West as yardstick for measuring progress, ingenuity, and knowledge production.

In our teaching, this would mean decentering the West in surveys of Europe (something many of us do already) by providing substantive, if not equivalent, coverage to the countries and peoples in East Central Europe, and even more so with respect to gender and sexuality, which gets me to my second point. As educators, regardless of our research focus, gender and sexuality, like class, race, and ethnicity, should simply be part of what we teach and not treated as specialized topics within a larger unit. The French Revolution is a prime example. Class was central to it, but so too were gender and race, for it was women and former slaves in Saint-Domingue that were relegated to passive citizenship within the revolution's foundational document: *The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen*, which ostensibly reflected enlightened and universalist conceptions of human rights. When teaching the French Revolution, I begin with women's bread riots and Toussaint L'Ouverture, not Louis XVI or the Oath of the Tennis Court, broadening the temporal and geographic scope of the revolution, as well as the cast of characters who played a role in it. We should teach as we research, encouraging students to pay attention to what was said, but also to what was not said; to seek out omissions and silences and to unearth the deeper meanings of watershed events.

What might a similar introduction to monumental events in East Central European history offer us? Wilczewski and Rankin suggest the importance of honing in on volatile moments and excavating them as sites for uncovering sexuality and non-conventional gender roles. What might we unearth about the revolutions that broke out in Budapest and Vienna in 1848 if we direct our gaze towards those who have escaped scholarly investigation? To what degree were women and homosexuals engaged in challenging the political and social order? As a corollary, what might we learn about the post-1848 conservative turn by examining state policies through the lens of gender and sexuality? To what degree were

⁸⁴ Maria Dębińska, "Self-Education as Activism: The Case of Trans Persons in Poland," in *The Routledge Handbook of Sexuality in East Central Europe*, ed. Agnieszka Kościńska et al. (London: Routledge), 438–48.

the revolts interpreted by conservative leaders in gendered terms? Did the tumult of the previous months mean greater restrictions for women and other groups? For an exemplary study on what such a line of inquiry can yield, we can look to Eliza Ablovatski's exploration of different revolutions three quarters of a century later—the 1919 revolutions in Budapest and Munich.⁸⁵

Another volatile moment that could prove particularly promising for illuminating non-conventional gender roles and sexual practices is the Stalinist period in postwar Eastern Europe. As men were disproportionately subject to arrest, imprisonment, and death, women were thrust into the role of head of household and family breadwinner. These women often lacked secondary (and even primary) education and the skills needed to secure work. They also shouldered the stigma of “guilt by association,” which sharply restricted their job prospects. Given such circumstances, how did women support their children? Did they enter into unwanted marriages or resort to sex work? Did state authorities turn a blind eye to these practices or even benefit from them via sexual exchanges? Were such practices condemned by family, friends, and neighbors or considered necessary evils given the desperate circumstances these women found themselves in? Following up on Florvil's emphasis on the need to focus on quotidian practices, what does highlighting such experiences reveal about the collateral damage caused by state violence and the ambiguities associated with utopian projects?

This brings me to my next point, inspired by Kurimay's plea for political and economic histories of the region that employ gender and sexuality as central frames of analysis. A political history of East European communist regimes could explore how ideas about gender and power influenced selections for administrative posts and policymaking. We know that communist governments were dominated by men and that they promoted a patriarchal and heteronormative system. How did these governments justify placing men in so many administrative posts given these regimes' official commitment to gender equality in all spheres of life? Were male policymakers considered more competent than their female counterparts? Were the women who did obtain high-level positions streamlined into particular positions because they were considered more womanly jobs or attuned to feminized concerns (e.g. Minister of Health and Education)? As a corollary, what did the relative lack of women in government mean for policies about women, families, sexuality, and reproduction? Throughout this forum, all contributors have emphasized the necessity of reading sources against the grain, mining them for omissions and obfuscations. What would such an approach reveal when considering what was left out of Central Committee meeting minutes and, indeed, who was left out of the meeting altogether?

While states often wield considerable power over their citizens, they do not have a total monopoly on it. As the work of the historians featured and referenced in this forum illustrates, zooming away from conventional corridors of power to quotidian expressions of it underscores their fluidity, unidirectionality, and the savvy way that ordinary individuals could mobilize them. A prime example is Wilczewski's work on rural women in interwar Poland, a group heretofore neglected in scholarship on rural history.⁸⁶ By placing women at the center of his analysis, he demonstrates how women engaged with modernizing policies and discourses, in some cases embracing them, in some cases pushing back against them. The history of rural lives in interwar East Central Europe could benefit greatly from more such gendered interventions. Exploring how gender norms were reconfigured in rural areas under communism also merits sustained research, given the gender imbalance that

⁸⁵ Eliza Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe: The Deluge of 1919* (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁸⁶ Michał Wilczewski, “Broken Land: Everyday Life and the Reconstruction of the Polish Countryside, 1914–1939” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017).

emerged in these areas as a result of men's disproportionate influx into the industrial labor force, which often required them to be away from home for considerable periods. In Romania, for instance, by the 1960s women constituted over 50 percent of the rural population and became *de facto* heads of households. What new insights about the upending of conventional gender roles might a study of such women yield? How and in what ways did women's self-identities and family life undergo transformation? How did they organize the household, family finances, and rear their children? What was the nature of their social lives and how did they find fulfillment and companionship? Did they engage in extramarital relations, including with other women, while their husbands were away? How might such stories of rural women's empowerment and autonomy complicate the historiography of rural lives in East Central Europe? Answers to these questions require thinking creatively about sources (and the search terms we use to identify our subjects), complementing local archives with personal archives, reading against the grain and for silences and omissions, drawing on memoir, letters, and oral history, and employing several methodological approaches.

Explorations of the quotidian are particularly crucial in the area of sexuality, which as Wilczewski notes, has been conventionally framed around sexual crisis, transgression, and moral panic, in large part because this is the story the archives and popular press tell us. As the work of Kurimay, Dagmar Herzog, Josie McClellan, Agnieszka Kościńska, and Kateřina Lišková illustrate, juxtaposing state policy against individual experience, and panic against desire, reframes historical actors as agents (rather than objects), producing a more nuanced and complex historiography of sexuality in the region. These ground-level analyses offer insight into how individuals were both affected by and responded to state instrumentalization of sexuality, specifically efforts to institutionalize and enforce particular norms, practices, and relationships (e.g., heteronormativity, patriarchy, pronatalism). Dolinsek rightly emphasizes the need for more work that examines how sexual minorities, sex workers, and others who eschewed conventional sexual norms negotiated their respective climates and found spaces for intimacy and self-expression. How did they build communities and navigate or even resist the discrimination and oppression they faced by the state, church, and their fellow citizens? Additional research on churches, or more aptly, particular parishes' or congregations' views of gay, lesbian, and trans individuals could prove particularly illuminating. We know such groups found support within the Protestant Church in East Germany, but did this apply to all localities? What about the Catholic or Orthodox churches and individuals that identified with these faiths?

My penultimate point is about the relationship between the global and the local, in particular East–South engagements, in framing histories of East Central Europe, which Dolinsek, Florvil, and Rankin explore. Such work has challenged the Eurocentric (read Westerncentric) approaches to the region, be they rooted in Cold War binaries or older ideas about civilization and development, revealing the productiveness of transnational exchanges, receptiveness of the region to ideas and people from other parts of the globe, and the relative porosity of the Iron Curtain. In this capacity, gender and sexuality have proven particularly fruitful sites of analysis. Research on collaborations between East European socialist women's organizations and women's organizations (both state and grassroots) in the Global South have demonstrated their essential contributions in the areas of women's emancipation, family planning, and public health, among other issues. For instance, Kristen Ghodsee has explored transnational feminist networks that emerged at the 1975 United Nations International Year of Women.⁸⁷ Additionally, Chiara Bonfiglioli's ongoing study of female activists and women's organizations in the non-aligned movement

⁸⁷ Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

highlights their contributions to nation-building, modernization, and combating women's oppression, offering crucial insight into a history dominated by men's perspectives and contributions.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, Małgorzata Fidelis's recent book on Poland during the Global Sixties explores how youth engaged with the global through popular culture and international events and, in the process, refashioned ideas about gender, sexuality, and their place in the world.⁸⁹ I would like to see these exemplary studies augmented. One topic requiring further research is how gender and sexuality inflected the lives of workers and students from the Global South in postwar Eastern Europe. How did these individuals experience life in the region and how did these experiences affect their self-identities with respect to gender, sexuality, race, and national belonging? Another global phenomenon that has been studied in the Polish and Hungarian contexts but could benefit from a broader regional and comparative approach is the influence of transnational human rights discourses and movements on issues related to gender and sexuality. How did the increasing prevalence of human rights activism in the 1970s and 1980s impact how individuals understood both foreign and domestic policies? Did they help shape gay, lesbian, and trans individuals' perceptions of themselves in society and their efforts to secure increased rights?

I would like to close by suggesting how studies of gender and sexuality in East Central Europe can help students think more critically about the state, society, and the manifold crises facing humanity. In my European survey course, I use citizenship and rights (defined broadly to encompass political, economic, and social rights as well as reproductive, sexual, and human rights) as lenses for analyzing the state, illustrating its crucial role in determining who is worthy and who belongs. Governments' stances on gender and sexuality serve as windows onto broader state goals; they are barometers for gauging how civic worth and national belonging is constituted. Right-wing politicians cloak discriminatory policies in language that emphasizes the urgency of safeguarding conventional (read cisgender and heteronormative) values and protecting the "nation," and in particular children, from promiscuity, deviance, and pedophilia. The moral panic that ensues from such rhetoric creates a breeding ground for vilification and even spatial exclusion: "gender ideology" is deemed a "threat worse than Nazism and Communism combined" and towns are encouraged to become LGBTQ+-free zones. Viktor Orbán's attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals not only deprived this group of their rights but also their personhood, dignity, and humanity, while also promoting social divisiveness that distracted the population from his (and his cronies') consolidation of power and wealth. Like Orbán, Donald Trump views LGBTQ+ and gender as ideologies, not as genuinely meaningful identities or orientations. In his vision of America, individuals who identify through such terms, along with people of color and (most) immigrants, do not belong to the nation—or in the nation's history books. In such a climate, simply referencing the term diversity, let alone devoting sustained study to it, can mean losing funding or even one's job. Given that Trump has, to varying degrees, followed the Orbán playbook, Hungary serves as a salient example of the reach and resonance of such rhetoric.

Accordingly, the battles being waged around identity, sexuality, and culture in parts of contemporary East Central Europe should be seen as productive entry points for thinking critically about similar efforts in the United States. As Dolinsek writes, "It is through the study of state institutions and their practices that students can grasp the mechanisms of power and prepare for an uncertain future." By alerting our students to present and future dangers, they can also devise ways of pushing back against such power. As Orbán's

⁸⁸ "WO-NAM: Women and Non-Alignment in the Cold War Era: Biographical and Intersectional Approaches" (<https://pric.unive.it/projects/wo-nam/home>).

⁸⁹ Małgorzata Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

recent fall from grace demonstrates, illiberalism is not inevitable and illiberal policies are not irreversible; the canary in the coal mine may be silent, but has not died, and the danger may pass. Paying attention, practicing empathy, and being actively engaged matters: in this respect scholars can play a crucial role, as Kurimay underscores, debunking falsehoods perpetuated by policymakers and pundits, be they about gender, LGBTQ+ individuals, or immigrants. While these lessons are currently playing out, and thus familiar to our students, it is important to emphasize that they are also part of a longer history during which people challenged—and successfully overturned—policies and even governments that undermined their rights or negated their identities and humanity.

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