Edited by Rosemarie Buikema, Liedeke Plate, and Kathrin Thiele

Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture

A Contemporary Guide to Gender Studies

THIRD EDITION

Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture

Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture provides a critical introduction to recent developments in cultural gender studies. Focussing primarily on the fields of art, culture, and media, it encompasses literary, historical, film, performance, and indigenous studies, as well as the digital humanities.

Gender studies currently find themselves at the heart of a deeply troubling socio-political landscape. The 18 chapters in this volume aim to provide knowledge on how to understand the current backlash against feminism and how to navigate the increasingly polarised debates surrounding systemic racism and sexism, anti-trans violence, and non-binary gender identifications. It teaches its readers how to address epistemic inequalities in knowledge production and how to make sense of the role of gender in thinking about racism, climate change, and armed conflict. Analysing the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion is a core task of feminist scholarship and, consequently, motivates the intersectional and gender-sensitive research methods that are brought to the fore in this book.

This vibrant and wide-ranging collection of essays is essential reading for anyone seeking an accessible yet sophisticated guide to the foundational issues, concepts, and debates within gender studies.

Rosemarie Buikema is Professor Emeritus of Art, Culture, and Diversity at Utrecht University. She has widely published in the field of Postcolonial Feminist Theory and the Arts and chaired the Graduate Gender Programme at Utrecht University until 2023.

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Introduction

Rosemarie Buikema, Liedeke Plate, Kathrin Thiele

Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture: A Contemporary Guide to Gender Studies is intended as an introduction to cultural gender studies in our terribly fraught times. The current edition is the fourth in a series of cultural gender studies textbooks in which gender studies practitioners in higher education in the Netherlands give an overview of the recent developments in this growing academic field. Gender studies remains a relatively young branch on the tree of knowledge – one that has come to fruition in close coordination with global social movements, such as the feminist, anti-colonial, and civil rights movements. In particular, cultural gender studies focuses on engaging generatively with unwritten, forgotten, and erased histories from feminist, queer, trans, de-/postcolonial, and critical posthuman(ist) perspectives. It analyses processes of in- and exclusion in media, art, and culture, as well as the effects of dominant and subaltern power and meaning regimes. This textbook is aimed at students from multiple disciplines within the broad field of the arts and cultural studies.

However, taking stock of the last 50 years of international feminist research in Dutch academia at this moment in world history compels one to look around while nervously wringing one's hands. In *too many* places around the globe, *too many* women, trans, non-binary, LGTBQIA+, migrant, and Indigenous people and other minorities see their relatively newly acquired rights to self-determination and economic independence threatened once more. The rise of extreme right-wing and populist governments is symptomatic of a patriarchy that feels itself aggrieved and threatened all across the world – a phenomenon that is yet to be fully comprehended and understood. Here we may think of the Central European University (CEU), which was forced to relocate its prominent Gender Studies Department from Budapest to Vienna following Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's 2018 ban on gender studies, in line with the current and popular defamation of gender studies as a mere exercise of 'wokeness'. We may consider President Trump's executive order intended to '[defend] women from gender ideology extremism and restor[e] biological truth to the federal government', passed on his first day in office in January 2025, which recognises only two immutable biological sexes, male and female. Today, it is as important as ever to amplify the voices of those who fight against heteropatriarchal norms and conditions and the systemic racism structuring our inter-human relations and to acknowledge the progress that has been made in recent decades, as well as the achievements upon which we can build in the years to come, as we continue to energise resistance against injustice and inequality. It remains of the utmost importance to create space for more visibility and acceptance for our truly diverse and heterogeneous world, be it in view of different forms of racialisation, LGBTQIA+ people, or movements such as #ReadWomen, #MeToo, and #AmINext (protesting the murder of Indigenous women, but also the unfair dismissal of critical academics).

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We here acknowledge the social and political forces opposing gender studies and want to underscore the violence inherent in the backlash against gender studies and theory. Gender studies currently finds itself at the heart of a polarised socio-political field, and its practitioners are the target of organised violence. This violence is brought into sharp focus, for example, when Judith Butler – distinguished Professor in the Graduate School and the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of the paradigm-shifting and agenda-setting book *Gender Trouble* (1990) and, most recently, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024) – was confronted in São Paulo, Brazil, by a group of right-wing religious fundamentalist protesters burning an effigy of them as a witch at a conference on democracy they helped organise (Jaschik 2017). Unfortunately, such violence is not a singular event. Rather, it has to be seen as part of a transnationally circulating anti-gender discourse that is integral to recent strategies of the Roman Catholic Church and right-wing political agendas. Discussing these and other 'anti-gender ideology' mobilisations in Europe, David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (2016) note:

> Although its manifestations considerably vary from one country to another, we observe similar discourses and mobilisation strategies against gender equality and LGBT rights across borders. This is illustrated by the circulation of logos, flags and names, as well as lines of argumentation. To give an example, the French La Manif pour Tous [Protest for all] has been a crucial source of inspiration for activists abroad, as shown by the circulation of its iconographic material. This movement has been directly 'exported' to Italy, where activists named themselves 'La Manif pour Tous Italia' (in French) until recently, adopted the same image, translated French posters and maintained contacts with its French counterpart.
>
> (Paternotte and Kuhar 2016: 1–2; see also Kuhar and Paternotte 2017 and Lauzun 2023)

Throughout these mobilisations, the word 'gender' has become a shorthand for all things evil and threatening, 'a patriarchal dream-order where a father is a father; a sexed identity never changes; women, conceived as "born female at birth", resume their natural and "moral" positions within the household; and white people hold uncontested racial supremacy' (Butler 2024: 14–15). Butler here uses the term 'dream-order' to emphasise the phantasmatic nature of these representations of a world to which to return.

The chapters in this book have the central aim to provide tools to analyse these phantasms and to understand how particular ideas about masculinity, for instance, play into the transnational 'resistance to feminism' (Verloo and Paternotte 2018), the rise of anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQIA+, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, and nationalist political leaders, and rampant gender-based violence. They provide knowledge on how to navigate the increasingly polarised debates around cancel culture, trans issues, and non-binary gender identities, how to address epistemic inequalities in knowledge production, how to deal with the backlash against feminism, and how to make sense of the role of gender in thinking about racism, climate change, and armed conflict.

Yet what do we actually mean when we use the term 'gender'? In this book, we follow the lead of feminist theorist Joan W. Scott (2010), who, in her article 'Gender: Still a Useful Category for Analysis?', wrote:

> Gender is, I would argue, the study of the vexed relationship (around sexuality) between the normative and the psychic, the attempt at once to collectivize fantasy and to use it for some political or social end, whether that end is nation-building or family structure. In the process,

> it is gender that produces meanings for sex and sexual difference, not sex that determines the meanings of gender.
>
> (13)

Gender studies acts as an umbrella discipline under which research is grouped that aims to identify and analyse the power relations that make up our world. In the last decades of the twentieth century, gender was understood as the sociocultural counterpart to sexual difference. Gender studies in the European context took to heart Simone de Beauvoir's (1949, 2010) social constructivist insight that one is not born a woman (or a man), but that we are made so in a society that is characterised by patriarchal gender relations – a society in which (white, heterosexual) men and male-connotated symbols dominate. This is not to say that nature is the ground upon which gender is constructed. Instead, this construction is to be understood as a 'co-construction', with the material and social dimensions of the body 'intertwined in the production of the gendered body' (Butler 2024: 33).

In gender studies research, rigid patriarchal relations are critically examined in view of multiple grammars of difference (race, class, sexuality, age, ability). The field must not get bogged down in any biologically deterministic view of 'men' and 'women' – views that currently again receive much attention (think of popular scientific studies that claim we *are* our hormones or our brains, or the above-mentioned anti-gender ideology movement and its campaign to restore a supposedly natural, God-given gender essentialism). In the vast majority of cultures, however, it is still the case that masculinity – from concrete persons of the male gender to symbols associated with men and manhood – is valued above other gender positions. Therefore, as feminist epistemologist Sandra Harding (1986) already argued in 1986, feminists must theorise gender, conceiving of it as

> an analytic category within which humans think about and organize their social activity rather than as a natural consequence of sex difference, or even merely as a social variable assigned to individual people in different ways from culture to culture.
>
> (18)

The power of definition – i.e., the power to define who and what counts, and who and what does not, what is a major or a minor cultural or political issue – is still predominantly in the hands of (white) men. Until women, trans, non-binary, LGTBQIA+, migrant, and Indigenous people and other minorities are included in this power of definition and have the ability to innovate and effect change, feminist and gender-sensitive analyses will retain their urgency. It is because of the many dimensions involved in gender enquiries that researchers in cultural gender studies always look for knowledge and insights from diverse academic disciplines. Only in this way can the complexity of core gender studies issues be sufficiently addressed. Gender studies is, therefore, necessarily interdisciplinary.

In recent decades, theorisation in cultural gender studies has established a robust conceptual framework and a vocabulary enabling the naming and recognition of flagrant injustices and power inequalities whenever and wherever they emerge. Today, we can adequately name harmful and undesirable abuses that for centuries were considered normal, recognising them as symptoms of beliefs and practices rooted in patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist orders. Developing a conceptual framework is a fundamental prerequisite for political action and transition. In order to name harmful practices within a dominant and unjust, normalising order and to make them negotiable – which is one of the foundational premises of *Doing Gender in Media,*

Art, and Culture: A Contemporary Guide to Gender Studies – adequate words, images, and intersectional analytical instruments are needed.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists from across the political and cultural spectrum became collectively aware of the lack of imagination, missing words and images, and the need to find concepts and theories that could unite the feminist community. First, they looked for a language that would empower feminists to speak, resist, and act, and that could help feminists achieve their personal and political goals. In the European context, the civil rights and Black women's movements, as well as theories based on French psychoanalysis, gave direction to this search for a new, feminist discourse. Each from their own perspective, these schools of thought illuminated how the symbolic order – that is to say, how the language and visual culture itself – is based on the suppression of the feminine, the Other.

Feminists such as Audre Lorde and Luce Irigaray taught the next generation of feminist scholars, in very different yet resonating ways, how difficult it is to take your place in a system based on your exclusion. Whether this exclusion involved the feminine, the non-heterosexual, the non-white, the non-middle-class, the non-Christian, or whatever politically and culturally marginalised category, your historical absence was the norm, your presence a disruption – not to say, a threat – to that norm. How then to appear without being barred? How then to speak and to find a listening ear? These were the questions facing the young discipline of gender studies, and to which at least some answers have since been formulated.

An important guide in the search for answers to those questions in those early years was Audre Lorde's (1984) forceful assertion: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. Lorde already knew that there can be no actual revolution without revolutionising the figurations of thought themselves. In resonance with Lorde, Luce Irigaray ([1977] 1980), too, states in her famous essay 'When Our Lips Speak Together':

> If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again. Don't you feel it? […] If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other.
>
> (69)

Thus, the task of the feminist movement and feminist theorising has always been to embody a permanent challenge to that which is established and settled. Established meanings can be disrupted. Traditional power relations can be destabilised.

In recent decades, many feminist thinkers, writers, and practitioners have given shape to this definition of the feminist as a cross-thinker. Building upon the work of Audre Lorde, feminist intersectional scholars introduced the practice of 'asking the other question'. In doing so, they foregrounded the necessity for marginalised groups to problematise the obvious, or common sense, which often turns out to be anything but 'common'. If you ask yourself what people have had to render unseen and unsaid in order to experience something as shared and as meaningful, by asking 'the other question', you can expose the mechanisms of in- and exclusion. It enables you to make visible which interests have been served, and which have been erased. Or, as Mari Matsuda (1991) explains:

> When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, 'Where are the class interests in this?'.
>
> (1189)

Revealing the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion is one of the central tasks of feminist scholarship and drives the intersectional and gender-sensitive research methods that we present in *Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture: A Contemporary Guide to Gender Studies*.

The methodology of relentlessly and fearlessly continuing to question remains characteristic of intersectional feminism and the academic field of gender studies today. Continuously asking the other question requires ongoing analysis of whether one's liberation does not simultaneously imply the oppression of another. In this current era – when we cannot help but acknowledge that the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are always multi-dimensional – in pursuing inclusion and equal rights, it is of the utmost importance to be and remain vigilant against being co-opted by the status quo that serves ethnocentric or nationalistic agendas. In intersectional feminism, the freedom of one is inseparable from the freedom of the other.

Hence, continuously asking the other question is a necessary strategy if we are to stay away from the populist assumption that emancipation and diversity and inclusion trajectories have gone 'too far' and have led to the disruption of our so cherished traditional values, as populist politicians would like us to believe. To counter that kind of populist 'common sense' – in Europe and elsewhere – academic feminism must have disciplinary factual knowledge at hand.

In the Netherlands, an extreme right-wing government has also been sworn in, and much work remains to be done regarding gender equality. As in many other places around the world, issues related to #MeToo are prevalent in the Netherlands as well: one in ten women there has been raped at some point in their lives. Dutch health care for individuals who do not conform to the norm of white masculinity is lagging behind. Indeed, for many common diseases, women, people from lower social classes, and racialised people receive correct diagnoses and adequate treatment significantly later than their highly educated white male counterparts. Access to queer and trans care is continually restricted and is currently being scaled back more than ever. It is also worth noting that the Netherlands has never had a female or non-white prime minister, and wage disparity remains a fact. Women's gross wages are, on average, 13 percent lower than men's, and the gross wages of women of colour and trans women further depress that average. In the Netherlands, women and racialised people were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, among other reasons because they are more likely to work in jobs that expose them to occupational health and safety risks; and so on and so forth. Today, the politics of asking the other question, grounded in knowledge and experience, manifests in many ways in feminist practice and also shapes the methodological design of interdisciplinary work.

The quest for adequate words and images and the refusal of what is blatantly wrong are like creating cracks through which the light can enter. This is how we might define the task of cultural gender studies in today's deeply fraught political environment: the creation of cracks in the otherwise foreclosed constructions of that which is considered self-evident, of over-determined narratives, and through which the light can enter. Practicing this critical, intersectional, and inclusive thinking and doing is an extremely powerful antidote that has been developed from many and various perspectives during the past decades, and that we can continue to develop in the context of cultural gender studies at this juncture of polarisation and all-consuming violence – a violence that, once more, disproportionately impacts women, trans, non-binary, LGTBQIA+, migrant, and Indigenous people and other minorities on an unacceptably immense scale.

Every political change seems to create more, seemingly endless violence against 'others', and yet this violence will necessarily also always provoke counter-forces – the cracks through which the light must stream. Here you may think of Nirmal Puwar (2004), who has called these 'others', these 'bodies out of place', 'space invaders'; or of Sara Ahmed's (2023) *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (2023), in which she pays attention to 'The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way' (as the book's subtitle reads). This creation of counterforces, the sharing of knowledge and

experience, and the practicing of concrete transnational solidarity have been the achievements of 50 years of gender studies. However, 50 years is not enough to completely dislodge what is rooted in centuries of cultural traditions. Herein, then, lies the task, ever-changing in both form and content, for future generations of feminists: ask the other question, be the space invader, be the killjoy.

From this legacy, the authors and editors of this book sought to develop a teaching method in a field that has arisen from the call for democratisation and from loyalty to other than neoliberal ways of thinking. From its very beginnings, cultural gender studies has advocated and put into practice the democratisation of education (see, e.g., hooks 1994, 2003, 2010). Room was made for the production of knowledges beyond the hitherto dominant historical and cultural perspectives, and a start was made to include the voices of marginalised groups in the curricula of history, art history, media studies, religious studies, and art and culture studies. Like its three predecessors, this book has been developed in close collaboration with its users: teachers and students of gender studies in Amsterdam, Leiden, Maastricht, Nijmegen, and Utrecht. Each new edition of this textbook over the last two decades has undergone thorough revision and builds on the experiences of students, whose evaluations, comments, and recommendations were used to revise our texts. This fourth textbook edition results from a particularly close collaboration between the gender studies programmes from Utrecht University and Radboud University. Both universities offer a broad introduction course in cultural gender studies for first- and second-year students, in which the principles of the discipline are taught. Every year, we train hundreds of students at Dutch universities to become critical, intersectional, gender-sensitive researchers, able to reflect on the role that gender – in combination with multiple other axes of difference – has in the formation of knowledge, culture, and identity, and to articulate theoretically informed views on the role of gender (used in an intersectional sense) in relation to the arts, culture, and the media.

To recount the history of this textbook in greater detail, as it is a history that, in itself, is also a form of documentation of how feminist research was established and continues to shape higher education in the Netherlands: the edition of *Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture: A Contemporary Guide to Gender Studies* presented here is the updated and substantially revised third iteration of *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture* (first edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin, 2009, second edition edited by Rosemarie Buikema, Liedeke Plate, and Kathrin Thiele 2017). This textbook, in turn, succeeded the volume *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction* (edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik 1995), first published in Dutch under the title *Vrouwenstudies in de cultuurwetenschappen* (1993), shortly after the establishment of the first 'women's studies' programmes in the Netherlands. It outlined the foundational findings of women's studies research and explained how the field evolved into an independent academic discipline. In response to critical questions about the research field, in the last decades of the 20th century, the discipline was compelled not only to analyse the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in culture and society, but also to look critically into its own implicit practices of exclusion, and to examine how differences within and alongside the categories of woman and man (think of Black, white, straight, gay, cis, intersex, transgender, old, young, religious, secular, poor, rich, etc.) determine the meaning and effects of the concept of gender. At this point, the discipline faced the need to consider the implications of the normativity of these binary categories in general. More concretely: not everyone identifies as male or female, and thus gender studies gradually replaced women's studies, dispelling the misconception that women's studies dealt with issues pertinent only to women and emphasising that other gender identities and identifications, and a more intersectional and complex approach, are considered in gender studies research. Whereas the first two books resulted

directly from teaching an emerging curriculum in women's studies at Utrecht University, for the subsequent ones, broader cooperation has been sought from campuses and colleagues across the Netherlands who are closely working together in gender studies in the context of the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies (NOG). This newly revised and expanded edition of the *Doing Gender in Media, Art, and Culture* textbook reflects the current wide field of cultural gender studies in the Netherlands.

In this edition, we once again take our cue from the idea of a present that, as it were, is 'in conversation' with previous versions of the past. As in previous editions, the process of reconstruction and constitution, of retelling and looking ahead, is illustrated in each chapter of this book by a central figure: a 'figuration' that serves as a prism for addressing key issues in the field. That is to say, the chapters always begin with a micro-narrative (the story of the core figuration) and progress towards a macro-narrative. We derive the methodological tool of the figuration from Donna Haraway, who, in the 1980s, conceptualised the figuration of the cyborg not only to account for the relationship between humans and technology at the end of the twentieth century and challenge dichotomies entrenched in western thought, such as human/animal and nature/culture, but also to question the power relations inscribed in these binaries (Haraway 1985).[1] The meaning of a figuration is complex, often contradictory, and multi-layered, extending beyond itself to refer to historical reality while simultaneously being infused with myth. Rosi Braidotti (2017) characterises the figuration as follows:

> Figurations of alternative feminist subjectivity [...] differ from classical 'metaphors' in calling into play a sense of accountability for one's locations. They express materially embedded cartographies and as such are self-reflective and materially grounded. Figurations, for instance, the cyborg, are both analytical tools and creative devices. They act as the spotlight for aspects of one's practice which were blind spots before. By extension, figurations generate and express knowledge claims. In relation to our theories of the subject, figurations such as the nomadic, the cyborg, the black subject, etc., function as conceptual personae. This means that they are not mere metaphors, but rather materially embedded and embodied accounts of one's power relations. On the creative level, figurations express also the desire for change, transformation, or alternative relations to the power one inhabits: they are affirmative as well as critical tools.
>
> (Braidotti 2017: 249)

The figuration that opens each chapter inaugurates a layered, complex network of significations. It tells the story of a core figure that has dwelt in different contexts, continually, albeit ever so slightly, changing. In the chapters, the genealogy of those stories is traced and retold. Both well-known and lesser-known histories are put on the map again as the authors engage in debate with and about fellow scientists and scholars. In Part I, exemplary case histories lead to a discussion of five central conceptual debates in gender studies. Based on the figurations of Sojourner Truth, Virginia Woolf, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sarah Baartman, Mary Seacole, and Florence Nightingale, we introduce a selection of core concepts that have shaped contemporary cultural gender studies. These concepts are crucial parts of the toolbox of anyone who wants to *do gender* in media, art, and culture. The concepts introduced in this first part are as follows: intersectional analysis, situated knowledges, and interdisciplinarity, as well as the double-sided coin of representation and the art of telling histories differently.

Part II guides the reader through further case histories, approached again via iconic feminist or otherwise significant figurations. This part reflects on the diverse geopolitical and gender-sensitive approaches in multiple feminist (liberatory) struggles. The chapters specifically

examine what *doing gender* means in the contexts of Iranian feminist activism, queer Marxism, feminist Marxism, post-socialist Eastern European feminism, transgender studies, and masculinity studies.

The six chapters that constitute the final part of this volume move into the interdisciplinary field of gender studies. Part III presents chapters that demonstrate how various disciplinary fields and practices in the humanities and the social sciences *do gender* in conjunction with contemporary gender studies. This part starts with an exploration of oral history as a means to counter dominant historical narratives about the Dutch colonial past. It then discusses how feminist documentary filmmaking can realise the political potential of documentary to make invisible realities, injustices, and oppressions visible. Next, we discuss how to read Indigenous knowledges and ethically acknowledge, embrace, and support Indigenous visions on gendered life and motherly care. Then, drawing on the figuration of Marina Abramović, *doing gender* is demonstrated within the context of performance studies by means of thinking through the body and affect. The penultimate chapter is devoted to how the poetics of comics enables particular visual and visceral explorations of experience that are central to both queer visibility and the aims of graphic medicine. The final chapter takes digital data as its figuration to explore the intersectional, gendered, racialised, and class implications of datafication and demonstrate how data can simultaneously perpetuate oppression and serve as a tool for social justice activism.

At this point it is important to realise once more that narratives centralising minorities or 'others' (such as [Black] women, people of colour, queer and trans people, or a critical view on masculinity) do not necessarily yield a gender-sensitive and critical *doing gender* enquiry. It is not just about the *what*, but always also about *how* an enquiry takes shape that other knowledges are generated. In this textbook, we aim to show that choosing a (gendered) protagonist for research offers an opportunity for feminist analysis. To exemplify the potential of gender-sensitive analyses and model gender-sensitive methodologies, each chapter demonstrates the importance of focusing on *what kind of questions* are being put to the story of the core figure, icon, protagonist, or struggle, as well as *what kind of gender theories* are being used. This leads to *another kind of knowledge* because other stories are told. These, we hope, are read as stories that remain involved and implicated in the very processes they reflect upon and try to theorise. It is such knowledge generation that most affirmatively leads to a view on (scientific) objectivity that is 'not about disengagement but about mutual *and* usually unequal structuring, about taking risk in a world where "we" are permanently mortal' (Haraway 1988: 595–596), intertwined with processes we are struggling to make sense of.

The pedagogical mission of this book manifests itself in these diverse approaches to the thematic choices, debates, and discussions, as much as in the various concepts introduced by the chapters. It also manifests itself in our use of language. Because language materialises certain worlds, if feminist enquiries aim to envision different worldings, other ways of wording are also required. Our choice to de-capitalise 'the west' and 'western' throughout this volume aims to signal a shift away from habituated centrisms and geopolitical hegemonies that continue to dominate our imagination, also when used for alternative futures yet to come.[2] As editors, we decided similarly to lowercase 'white' but capitalise 'Black' when used as a racial (and hence, social and cultural) designation, to address systemic and structural racism. While we are aware of arguments in favour of capitalising both 'white' and 'Black' (e.g., Appiah 2020; Nguyễn and Pendleton 2020) in order to 'call attention to White as a race as a way to understand and give voice to how Whiteness functions in our social and political institutions and our communities' (Nguyễn and Pendleton 2020), in this book, we wanted to stay as far away as possible from how the capitalisation of 'white' is used by white supremacists, who do not signal their wish to understand and fight racism through it, but instead assert their belief in the foundationally racist

claim of white ascendancy. That the terrain on which feminist knowledges and discussions are generated is always precarious and contestable is what this book seeks to explicate in manifold ways. We must always remain alert to the meanings and connotations of words when considering their spelling: they evolve through time and in different contexts, but no wor(l)ding is ever innocent (Haraway 1988).[3]

For further curricular and studying engagement, there are questions at the end of each chapter and a glossary designed to provide conceptual clarity for readers of this book. The questions or proposed exercises at the end of each chapter are intended to inspire real teaching environments where we hope this book will be taken up. They aim to spur further study and strengthen the impact of the material presented in each chapter. However, they are also invitations for readers to formulate their own research questions that deserve further investigation. With this new edition, we hope to train a new generation of gender studies practitioners in relentless curiosity and continual feminist inquisitiveness and equip them with the tools to navigate these fraught times.

Notes

1 The figuration is related to the 'figura', which in theology and literary theory is a representation or symbolisation of someone or something else (Auerbach [1938] 1959; Porter 2017).
2 An exception to this rule is the capitalisation of the term 'Euro-Western' in Chapter 15. Here, the author chose to capitalise both words to indicate the centrality of European colonialism to hegemonic ways of thinking, being, and doing in the western world.
3 See also The Diversity Style Guide (www.diversitystyleguide.com) and Modest and Lelijveld (2021).

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Part I

Concepts for Doing Gender

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1 What Is Left Unseen in the Story of Sojourner Truth

Intersectional Feminisms and Feminist Historiography

Katrine Smiet

Figure 1.1 Iris Kensmil, *Sojourner Truth*, 2018, oil on canvas.
Source: Collection of the Centraal Museum Utrecht/purchased with the support of the Mondriaan Fund 2019.

When you visit the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, you may encounter Sojourner Truth there (Figure 1.1). In a portrait in light blue and greyish tones, Truth looks directly at the viewer, and the viewer looks back at her. Sojourner Truth was an enslaved woman who became a prominent voice for women's rights and against slavery in the nineteenth century in the United States. The portrait of Truth was painted by Iris Kensmil in 2019. The work was commissioned by the Centraal Museum in the context of the exhibition 'What is Left Unseen' – a collaboration between the museum and academics from Utrecht University's Graduate Gender Programme in the context of the research project *MOED: The Museum of Equality and Difference*. In the exhibition, the portrait of Truth was displayed in the same room as a portrait and artefacts belonging to the nineteenth-century Utrecht-based writer and abolitionist Nicolaas Beets, as well as two artworks portraying the pioneering Black Dutch academics Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed created by the artist patricia kaersenhout.[1] This curation had the intention to expose – as the exhibition title indicated – issues that might otherwise be left unseen, such as the connections between Truth and the Dutch history of

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slavery and abolition, as well as those between Truth and twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black and intersectional feminisms.

Yet, who was Sojourner Truth, and what is she doing here in this museum space in Utrecht today? What is the connection between Truth, Black feminism, and intersectional thought? How and why is the story of Truth retold and re-activated, and what is at stake in engaging with the story today? In order to unpack these questions, this chapter delves deeper into the story of Sojourner Truth and its reception in feminist thought. The painting in the Centraal Museum forms the guiding thread for this investigation of Truth's continuing relevance to contemporary feminism.

By exploring the story of Sojourner Truth and her impact on feminist thought, this chapter is an exercise in feminist historiography. Feminist historiography looks at how the history of feminism is written: it looks at how we tell feminist stories, and how these stories also position 'us', the ones who tell them. In investigating the story of Sojourner Truth, I have been most interested in tracing what feminist theorist Clare Hemmings (2011) has called 'the political grammar of feminist theory' (2). Truth's story is an important site from which to trace this 'grammar' because it has become a familiar reference point to many feminists, especially in relation to intersectionality, the feminist approach that looks at the co-construction and interplay of different forms of oppression. In order to understand further how the story of Truth can help us understand how we relate to past feminisms, as well as how it speaks to contemporary debates on how to think and practise feminism intersectionally, we will first turn to the historical figure of Sojourner Truth, who she was, and why her story is still being retold today.

Truth's Story

While her exact date of birth is unsure, we know that Truth was born as Isabella Baumfree at the end of the eighteenth century in upstate New York in the United States. Her parents were enslaved to the Hardenbergh family, and as a result she too was born into a social system that considered her not to be a free human being, but rather as dehumanised property. The Hardenberghs were wealthy landowners who owned a large estate. Truth lived the first decades of her life in enslavement, being sold several times and working for different 'masters'. These first few biographical facts already make it clear that Truth lived in a historical moment marked by great inequalities – inequalities that Truth, as a Black woman born into enslavement, experienced personally. Black people were not considered full human beings in possession of rights and dignity. Women too did not have any political rights in this historical moment: they were not allowed to vote or to own property, and their access to higher education was restricted. As a Black woman born into enslavement, Truth not only suffered from these unequal systems, but she also spoke out and fought against them. She was an abolitionist – an activist who fought for the abolition of slavery. She was also a suffragist, meaning that she was an advocate of women's right to vote.

Truth developed her political voice following her emancipation in 1827. She escaped from a slave master, just one year before slavery was officially abolished in the state of New York. As a free woman, Isabella took on the name of Sojourner Truth (Painter 1996; Washington 2009). In *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* – the life story that Truth dictated – it is recounted that she saw herself as called by the Spirit to 'go East' and preach the word of God (Perry 2005). In other words, she received the name that we know her by today through a spiritual experience. Indeed, this name is very telling for how she came to see her life's mission. As the historian Nell Painter (1996) explains, Sojourner Truth literally means 'itinerant preacher, for a sojourner is someone not at home, and truth is what preachers impart' (74). As a travelling preacher, Truth travelled

around the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, spreading both her religious and her political truths.

Truth spoke at anti-slavery and women's rights conventions to spread her abolitionist and feminist message. In this phase of her life, Truth sustained herself by selling photographs of herself and her *Narrative*. On the photographs was printed the slogan: 'I sell the shadow to support the substance', indicating that the photographs were a source of her livelihood. In this period, Sojourner Truth became increasingly well-known for her public speaking. The most famous of Truth's speeches is her intervention at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851. This speech is today known by the repetition of a deceivingly simple question: 'Ain't I a Woman?'

However, before delving deeper into the speech itself in the next section, I first want to call attention to the Dutch dimension to Truth's life story, because this can partly explain why we today encounter Truth in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Truth's first language was Dutch (Dewulf 2012), because she was enslaved by Dutch settler colonists and grew up within a Dutch-speaking community in what is today upstate New York. In other words, while the story of Sojourner Truth might seem a quintessentially 'American' story, the history of Dutch colonialism and Dutch involvement in the slave trade and enslavement are at its heart. Perhaps we can recognise this transatlantic connection also within the artwork by Kensmil. The cultural critic Nick Aikens (2019) suggests that in this artwork, as well as others made by the artist, 'Kensmil's light undercoat serves to light up historical figures who, in the Netherlands at least, have been kept in the shadows, and to underscore their importance for *our* present' (55). The artistic representation of Truth, as well as her positioning in this context, thus makes something visible which is easily 'left unseen', as the exhibition title would have it: both the transatlantic entanglements of colonialism, racism, and enslavement, and the transatlantic entanglements in the resistance to it. Because not only was slavery a transnational enterprise, but so too were the resistance movements to it.

In the exhibition, this is visualised through the juxtaposition of Truth with Nicolaas Beets, a Dutch abolitionist. Truth and Beets were both active in the same abolitionist circles, such as the North American National Freedman's Relief Association (Buikema 2019: 17). Through this act of curation, the exhibition made an explicit intervention into the dominant narrative around the Dutch colonial past and its gendered and raced protagonists. As Nancy Jouwe (2019) – one of the curators and researchers within the MOED project – notes, the intervention re-positions the role of Beets to 'counteract the notion of the male white saviour who grants the Other existence' and to 'place Beets' story within a transnational context of Black resistance, critically situating it in a genealogy of abolitionism and anti-racist struggles and scholarship in the Netherlands (35).

The juxtaposition of Truth with the contemporary Dutch Black feminists Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed further emphasises the transatlantic and transhistorical threads connecting Black feminists. In this vein, Aikens (2019) notes:

> While Kensmil's work draws from the images, histories and discourse of the US and Britain over the past few years, she has very deliberately set it in conversation or contestation – with the specificity of the Dutch context and the strength of People of Colour and the Black community in the Netherlands.
>
> (61)

We will return to this theme in the section on Truth as a foremother for Black feminism. Now that we have some basic sense of who Sojourner Truth was, we will look in more detail at her famous speech and its legacy.

Truth's Speech and Its Legacy

As noted above, most feminists today connect Sojourner Truth to the question 'Ain't I a Woman?'. This question comes from her most famous speech, in which she challenges prevailing stereotypes about womanhood and femininity. Notably, she challenges the idea that all women are physically weak and need special treatment. She recounts a viewpoint that was common in her time: that 'women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere' (Gage 1863: 116). Yet, she contrasts this with her own experiences: 'nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place' (Gage 1863: 116). She calls attention to her own physical strength – 'Look at me! Look at my arm!' – and recounts her experiences with strenuous physical labour – 'I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns' (Gage 1863: 116). She painfully recounts how her position as a mother was made impossible within the system of racial slavery – 'I bore thirteen children, and saw all but one sold off to slavery' – the injustice of which was not socially recognised: 'When I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me' (Gage 1863: 116).

By speaking from her lived experiences as a Black and formerly enslaved woman, as someone who was not treated according to the norms of womanhood or femininity of the time, Truth exposed to her audience how those hegemonic gender norms were at the very same time *racialised*. In other words, these dominant norms around femininity did not apply equally to all women but were actually tailored to women of a specific racial and class positioning: white, upper-class, and middle-class women. Those alone were the women at that time who had the luxury to be 'weak', to be treated deferentially, and to have their motherhood socially recognised. These feminine privileges were not extended to all or even most women at the time. By contrasting the dominant ideal of womanhood with her own experiences and treatment as a Black, formerly enslaved woman, Truth thus exposes these steep differences between the life experiences of women. In doing so, she reveals that women are not a homogenous group. She reveals that the normative ideal of what a woman was, or should be, was thoroughly shaped by race and class, rather than being based on gender alone.

These important insights from Truth's speech strongly resonate with Black feminist thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For instance, in *Sister Outsider*, the Black feminist poet and essayist Audre Lorde (1984) calls out the 'pretense to homogeneity covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist' (116, emphasis in original). Like Truth, Lorde stresses the different life experiences of white women and women of colour and notes how feminism all too often takes white women's experiences as the starting point. Similarly, Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1981: 8) notes that the term 'women' is often used generically, when it is actually the experience of white women that is at stake. As these few examples demonstrate, the insights from Sojourner Truth's speech have resonated strongly within Black feminist thought in the twentieth century. Indeed, Sojourner Truth is an important foremother for Black feminism. She functions as a historical example that reminds Black feminists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that the issues with which they grapple are not new but instead carry a long history.

As we have seen, Truth experienced both sexism and racism, and she connected the social movements of abolitionism and women's suffrage in her life. For this reason, Truth's story has not only been an important historical reference point for Black feminism in general but has also become an important origin story for the *intersectional* approach to feminism in particular. In *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, I have more fully traced Truth's reception history and impact on intersectional theorising (Smiet 2021). Intersectionality refers to the recognition that different forms of oppression do not exist separately from one another. Rather, they 'intersect'

(cross) and co-construct one another. The term 'intersectionality' itself was first coined by the feminist and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), situated in the field of legal studies. She used the metaphor of a car accident taking place at a traffic intersection to illustrate that different forms of inequality and discrimination 'intersect' with one another and thus have to be considered in their interrelatedness (Crenshaw 1989: 149). Today, intersectionality is a powerful tool for feminist scholarship, used to recognise and address the complex and inherently multifaceted nature of inequalities, oppressions, and other forms of discrimination. As the sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) explain:

> When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.
>
> (2)

Since Crenshaw's introduction of the term, intersectionality has become the key framework via which to capture and analyse this complexity. When introducing or explaining intersectionality, Truth's story is often cited as a powerful illustration of intersectionality (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Crenshaw 1989). In introducing the problematic of intersectionality, the story of Sojourner Truth often comes up as a paradigmatic example of what is at stake, because in this story, the connection between inequalities based on gender and race, and the importance of thinking about these different forms of inequality in relation to one another, become vividly clear. In this regard, Truth stands out as a person who experienced both racism and sexism and who, in her political activism, called attention to the need to address these issues in their interrelatedness. In this context, the question 'Ain't I a Woman?' is heard as a reminder to feminism that issues of gender cannot be divorced from issues of race or other social inequalities, as I will discuss below in more detail. This has led feminist scholars Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004) to argue that 'the 19th century political locution "Ain't I a Woman?"... neatly captures all the main elements of the debate on "intersectionality" ' (76). Indeed, according to Kathy Davis (2008), the story of Sojourner Truth 'expresses the intersectionality of identity in a nutshell' (80).

This brings us now to the full understanding of the legacy of the story of Sojourner Truth for anti-racism and feminism, as well as anti-racist feminism: Sojourner Truth's story is an important historical reference point for Black feminism and intersectional feminism. And one specific way in which Black feminists have engaged with Sojourner Truth as an intersectional foremother is by re-activating her speech for their present context and it is to this that I will turn next.

Re-activating Truth's Question

The question 'Ain't I a Woman?' returns several times within Truth's speech and is the key refrain by which Sojourner Truth is known to feminists. However, as we engage with Truth's speech today, we can ask ourselves: who is the question 'Ain't I a Woman?' actually addressed to? Within the economy of the text, Truth first asks the question in response to a member of the audience who gives arguments against women's rights: a 'little man in black over there'. She thus uses the question as a rhetorical strategy to counter common justifications for women's oppression. By contrasting her own experiences with stereotypes around femininity, she shows those anti-feminist arguments to be flawed. Yet, while Truth addresses the question in the first instance to the male opponents of women's suffrage, the question is also addressed to her fellow feminists at the time. It was not only the male adversaries of women's rights who had

a stereotyped idea of who and what a woman is, but her fellow women's rights advocates too held racial prejudices. By asking 'Ain't I a woman?', Truth could thus be understood to expose exclusions and fault-lines within the women's movement of her time. If feminists were fighting for the vote for women, but the women they were fighting for were explicitly or implicitly white women, their struggle did not include Sojourner Truth. With her seemingly straightforward question 'Ain't I a women?', Truth actually questioned who was practically and symbolically in- and excluded from the notion of 'woman' at the time, and by extension, from the women's rights movement itself. Her speech called attention to differences among women and challenged the focus on white and middle-class women's concerns. By asking 'Ain't I a Woman?', Truth can thus also be understood to be asking: who is the normative subject of feminism? In this more expansive sense, we can understand Truth's question continuing to resonate across time and space. It is a question that continues to interpellate feminists from the nineteenth century up to the present day.

In the reception of Truth's speech within Black feminism, one clear trend is the re-activation of the question to speak directly to a different historical context. One of the clearest examples of this can be found in the work of the Black feminist theorist bell hooks. The title of hooks' famous debut *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* from 1981 is a direct reference to the speech of Sojourner Truth. In this work, hooks provides an overview of the history of sexist and racist discrimination against Black women in the United States – from the time of slavery to the time of writing in the late 1970s/early 1980s. As the subtitle indicates, hooks focussed on understanding and reconfiguring the position of Black women in relation to feminism and the women's movement more generally. In this regard, hooks was particularly concerned with how racism divided women. She argued that in order to build a women's movement that includes all women, racism has to be dismantled and tackled head on. The choice for Truth's phrase as a title for this work suggests that hooks finds in Truth's words a crystallisation of her own approach to understanding the relation between Black women and feminism. Looking back and reflecting on her choice for the title, hooks (1989) later indicated that she centralised Truth's question because 'this phrase was still a question contemporary Black women had felt compelled to raise as we confront a racist and sexist society that would deny our womanness' (164). The focus for hooks was not so much on the historical figure of Sojourner Truth: she did not explicitly attribute the title to Truth, nor did she discuss Sojourner Truth at length in the book. Instead, the focus was on the political message that she saw encapsulated in the phrase 'Ain't I a Woman?'. Rather than connecting the phrase to the specific historical figure of Sojourner Truth, hooks indicates that she was interested in the political meanings the question still evokes for Black feminists, not only in the nineteenth century, when Truth initially asked it, but still in the 1980s (hooks 1989: 164).

Returning again to the painting of Sojourner Truth by Iris Kensmil, we can note that the importance of Truth's story for Black feminism is also reflected in the context of the painting, both in the place this portrait takes in the overall oeuvre of the artist Iris Kensmil, and in the juxtaposition of Truth's portrait with artworks representing Black feminist scholars Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed in the 'What is Left Unseen' exhibition. Looking first at the context of the artwork itself, it is worth noting that the artist behind the portrait of Truth, Iris Kensmil, is an Afro-Dutch artist of Surinamese descent. In Kensmil's own oeuvre, portraits of Black feminists are 'recurrent presences' (Aikens 2019: 63). Notably, in her contribution to the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale 2019, Kensmil portrayed key Black female intellectuals, including bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Claudia Jones. As Nick Aikens (2019) also suggests, we can consider these figures as well as their ideas as 'Kensmil's artistic, intellectual and ideological friends'

(54). By painting Sojourner Truth, Kensmil emphasises Truth's place in a transnational and transhistorical lineage of noteworthy Black feminist writers, activists, and artists.

Second, in 'What Is Left Unseen', the portrait of Truth is juxtaposed with artworks that depict Black feminist scholars Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed. These artworks in the MOED exhibition are created by patricia kaersenhout who, like Kensmil, is also an Afro-Dutch visual artist of Surinamese descent. The artworks form part of kaersenhout's series *Proud Rebels* from 2015, which forms an homage to pioneers of the 1980s Black, migrant, and refugee women's movement in the Netherlands. Working with print and embroidery, kaersenhout portrays nine key figures from the movement. As Nancy Jouwe (2019) explains in her discussion of the curatorial process, the juxtaposition of these artworks depicting Truth, Wekker, and Essed in the MOED exhibition intends to show that the latter 'continue Truth's important work, connecting past and present workings of race and gender' (35). Here, the curators position Essed and Wekker as contemporary Dutch Black feminists who take up Truth's legacy and re-activate her question for a contemporary context.

This relationship between different generations of Black feminists is most literally expressed in a performance of Truth's iconic speech by Gloria Wekker, which has also become part of 'What Is Left Unseen'. In a video recording that was commissioned within the context of the project, Gloria Wekker reads out the famous speech by Truth while standing on the porch of a wooden colonial building in Suriname (MOED 2019). In the video, Wekker is shown both from the front and from the side. At different moments, the camera zooms in on Wekker's face or shows a wide-angle shot. This camera work, in conjunction with the calm and measured way in which Wekker reads the famous speech, give the video a solemn affect. It lends weight to Truth's words and allows its viewers to engage with the painful histories that Truth's speech recounts: the pain and injustice of enslavement and disenfranchisement. The fact that Wekker reads the speech as an Afro-Dutch woman is of course extremely significant, given the fact that Dutch was Truth's mother tongue. In this way, Wekker's re-activation of Truth's words also makes an intervention in the Dutch relation to colonial and slavery history, contesting the dominant position of what Wekker (2016) has famously called 'white innocence'. Gloria Wekker's re-enactment of the speech in 2019 performs an intervention similar to bell hooks' intertextual reference to Truth in her work in the 1980s: they re-activate the speech and the question and thereby make it speak to the contemporary context. In my interpretation, this re-activation shows that despite the centuries separating Truth from hooks and Wekker, Truth's historical question has maintained both its meaning and significance.

Questioning Truth's Words

As we have seen so far, Truth's 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech made a big impact on Black feminism and intersectional thought. However, as Black feminists re-activated Truth's seminal question and asked it anew, historical research on the story of Sojourner Truth in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries also led to a serious questioning of the version of the speech that has become famous. The biographies of Sojourner Truth by Nell Irvin Painter (1996) and Margaret Washington (2009) cast new light on what was known about Sojourner Truth's story and even called into question whether Sojourner Truth ever spoke the now famous sentence.

There are several reasons to question the historical accuracy of the 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech. Since Sojourner Truth herself never had the chance to learn how to read or write, all the information that we have about Truth is mediated through others. It was her white contemporaries who played the decisive role in determining what elements of the Sojourner Truth story

have been passed on to subsequent generations. The famous ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ speech is based on an account by the white feminist and abolitionist Francis Gage, which was published in 1863 in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*. This means that Truth’s speech was not written down until 12 years *after* the event. This simple fact already can give us pause for thought: is it not highly unlikely that the speech was recorded accurately, given this long hiatus between the event and the moment of its recording? Second, and more damningly, the speech as it was written down by Frances Gage also attributes a strongly caricatured dialect to Sojourner Truth. The speech is written in a supposedly phonetic transcription to capture a specific way of speaking, adapting vowels and leaving out consonants. We already see this in the famous question: the use of the word ‘ain’t’ instead of the more grammatically correct ‘aren’t’ or ‘am I not’. This writing style was probably intended to convey a way of speaking specific to enslaved people in the South of the United States in the nineteenth century. However, Truth was enslaved in the North of the United States and thus her first language was Dutch, not English! Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Sojourner Truth would have actually spoken in this way.

The unavoidable conclusion is that by portraying Truth in this way, Gage’s version of the speech does not do justice to Truth’s historical specificity. Rather, it turns her into a stand-in for a more generic and stereotyped image of an enslaved person. For that reason, both Margaret Washington (2009) and Nell Irvin Painter (1996) argue that Gage’s portrayal of Sojourner Truth is highly problematic. They argue that by attributing this particular accent and way of speaking to Truth, Gage actively *caricatured* her (Washington 2009: 228). The attribution of this Southern slave dialect paints Sojourner Truth as an uneducated and simple-minded woman: it effectively functions to ‘reinforce the image of Truth as a “darkey”’, as Carla Peterson (1995: 53) puts it. Washington (2009: 228) notes that this caricatured portrayal of Sojourner Truth says a lot about Gage’s class and racial privilege, and sense of entitlement and ownership. In other words, this historical research shows us that the racialised power dynamics between Sojourner Truth and her white contemporaries played a crucial role in this version of the speech that has become so famous.

Another key reason to question the version of the speech recorded by Gage is the discrepancy between this account and another transcription of the speech that exists. In an abolitionist newspaper at the time, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, a report mentioning Sojourner Truth’s intervention appeared, authored by Marius Robinson. There are commonalities between the speeches, and certain elements return in both of them. These elements, however, are in a different order and often also shown with different wording. Notably, in Robinson’s version of the speech, Truth does not ask the iconic question ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ that has become so strongly associated with Truth in the feminist reception. Instead, in Robinson’s transcription, Truth opens the speech stating, ‘I am a woman’s rights’. This rather strange ungrammatical sentence seems to bring together a claim to being a woman, and a claim to rights.

This discrepancy, as well as the significant problems in Gage’s version, have led historians to question whether Sojourner Truth actually spoke the legendary words ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’. On the one hand, the question bears a close resemblance to the abolitionist slogan ‘Am I not a woman and a sister’ – a variation on the gendered slogan ‘Am I not a man and a brother’. This slogan originated in the British abolitionist movement in the late eighteenth century and had a wide circulation in the form of a woodcut image re-printed on medallions (Bourne 1838). Nevertheless, on the other hand, for Nell Irvin Painter (1996: 171), the question ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ in this specific format should be considered purely Gage’s invention. If this memorable refrain was indeed said four times by Truth, Painter (1996) argues, then the account by Robinson would have probably at least mentioned it. Margaret Washington (2009) also suggests

that it is for all these reasons more likely that Truth would have made a statement like ‘I am a woman’, rather than posing the *question* ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ (229).

It should be clear by what I have argued and presented so far that racial power dynamics play a crucial role in the shaping of the image of Sojourner Truth through Frances Gage’s version of events. Recognising this could lead us to the conclusion that we should reject the Gage version of the speech altogether and instead set the historical record straight by bringing Robinson’s version to the fore. A website named *The Sojourner Truth Project* sets out to do exactly that (Podell 2020). This website was produced by a student, Leslie Podell, for a class assignment at the California College of the Arts. *The Sojourner Truth Project* website sets the two speeches side by side and highlights the discrepancies between them. The aim of the website is to explicitly challenge the dominance of Gage’s version of the speech. The project is presented as an attempt to ‘help us move in the direction of truth’ and to ‘offer a more historically correct and dignified perspective’ (Podell 2020), in which Gage’s version of the speech is introduced as ‘the most common yet inaccurate rendering of Truth’s speech’ (Podell 2020). The project is focussed on recovering ‘Sojourner’s authentic voice’ and aims to ‘dispel the misinformation that spawned from the inaccurate Gage speech’ (Podell 2020). With this strong language of ‘authenticity’ and ‘truthfulness’, *The Sojourner Truth Project* holds out the promise of correcting the historical narrative and giving us access to the real (thus far occluded) Truth/truth.

Yet, to which extent is this possible? Given the lack of primary sources and the scarcity of source material, Sojourner Truth is, by definition, an *overdetermined* historical figure (Peterson 1995). Carla Peterson (1995) stresses that ‘Truth comes to us as always already interpreted by others from their own situated and partial perspectives’ (24). As well as being an actual historical person, Sojourner Truth has also very much grown into an icon or a symbol (Painter 1996) that does powerful work for intersectional theorising and Black feminism, as we have seen. Yet how do the ‘historical Truth’ and the ‘symbolic Truth’ relate to one another? Can we actually uncover the ‘real Truth’ and set the historical record straight? Furthermore, does doing so mean that we need to choose between Gage’s and Robinson’s versions of the speech, dismissing the first and ratifying the second? To answer these questions, we have to return to the question of feminist historiography: the question of how feminist stories are told, from where they are told, for whom they are told, and how they could be told differently.

Telling Feminist Stories Differently

How do we tell stories about past feminisms, and how do such stories position those who tell them? These are questions that feminist historiographers ask themselves. Following feminist scholar Victoria Browne (2015), I define feminist historiography as ‘a theoretical meta-reflection on the ways that feminists conceive and construct histories of feminism and the resulting impacts upon feminist political and intellectual practice’ (4). In other words, feminist historiography is about uncovering and intervening in the different ‘stories’ that are told about the development of feminism (Hemmings 2011).

In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings (2011) carefully analyses and intervenes in the dominant stories that are told about feminism and feminist theory. Hemming traces ‘how feminists tell stories about Western feminist theory’s recent past, why these stories matter, and what we can do to transform them’ (1). As this statement already indicates, Hemmings’ engagement with feminist stories is twofold: first of all, mapping what types of narratives circulate and what the conceptual and political effects of these are; and second, strategically intervening into and disrupting the dominant modes of feminist storytelling. In the first part of the project, Hemmings