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CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS 9 (2022) 149–175

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Special Issue
Gender as Intersections: A Different Way of Seeing Central Asia

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Introduction

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Abstract

Gender-based violence, (geo)politics, and Islam continue to dominate the production of knowledge about Central Asia. While using a gender lens, this Special Issue offers a different perspective on the region. The authors link historical analyses of imperial and Soviet gendered modernities to contemporary Central Asians' daily lives and local nationalisms to shed light on often overlooked areas in the literature, such as a systematic screening out of historical and contemporary gender diversity, sex work, virginity tests, *in*-bodiment (as in corporeality, not just the performance of social norms,) queer activism, and the use and abuse of discourse on traditions. As a platform for a conversation about negotiating gender in Central Asia and indigenizing gender theory from within other than Euro-American contexts, this Issue is an example of knowledge production *by* and *with* Central Asians. This Issue is also an invitation to continue using a gender lens, as there are still several research areas that remain unexplored and would, we believe, benefit from such an approach.

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Keywords

Central Asia – gender – modernity – nationalism – retraditionalizing – (post)colonial – Soviet – Turkestan [also spelled Turkistan]

Thinking *With* Gender[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic offset our lives beginning in 2019 and delayed this Issue's publication. This fact should not diminish this Special Issue's contributions to gender studies. Presenting recent research that thinks *with* gender when it comes to Central Asia, as well as engaging in a constructive dialogue with other scholars by integrating the studies of gender in the region and the body of gender studies literature produced elsewhere, we make several important contributions.[2] This Issue's most important contribution is that it brings into focus existing epistemic blind spots, including a systematic screening out of historical and contemporary gender diversity, male and female sex work, varieties of local masculinities, female virginity tests, the *in*-bodiment (as in corporeality) and not just embodiment (as in performance) of social norms, queer activism, and the use and abuse of the discourse on traditions.[3]

The concept of "gender" refers to socio-cultural assemblages of ideas, practices, and artifacts used to differentiate among individuals in a society according to whether and how one is female, male, or any other culturally acceptable category. As an analytical concept *not* indigenous to Central Asia and *not* widely embraced by local populations, scholars, or governments,[4] theorizations of gender originated and matured in American and European academic and activist circles from the 1960s onward. This concept has been critically interrogated in a variety of ways for different reasons in different locations and disciplines.[5] Locally, the term "gender" (e.g., pronounced in Russian with hard "g" and rolling "r") was mainly introduced by international agencies to local activists and scholars during the last decade of the twentieth century.[6] Despite the concept's non-indigenous history, thinking *with* gender about local lifeways does not only replicate analytical concepts produced elsewhere. Rather, such thinking helps this Issue's authors provide nuanced analyses of human diversity in the region and its history by offering thicker descriptions, bending existing assumptions about gender orders, and challenging some (mis)conceptions about Russian and Soviet modernities' emancipatory goals.

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[1] The first part of the word "indigenous" comes from the late Latin *indigenus* and *indigena*, meaning "native" or/and from the Old Latin *indu*, a derivative from *endo*, meaning "in" or "within." The second part of the word comes from the Latin *gignere*, which means "to beget, produce, give birth." Hence, one can surmise that the etymological meaning of the word is close to "begotten, birth, within a native environment." Scholars argue that "there is a strong sense of *replication* to the term, with the evolution of the indigenous group being self-derived." Michael A. Peters and Carl T. Mika, "Aborigine, Indian, indigenous or first nations?," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 13 (2017), 1229–30. Although the first known use of the word is traced back to the 1640s when it was used to discuss plants and cultures of "the New World," we use this term to refer to any community claiming to have continued ancestral ties to and stewardship of the land, waterways, and oral traditions.

[2] These sources include, among others, the 2015 edited volume by Thomas Kruessmann entitled *Gender in Modern Central Asia* (Zurich: LIT VERLAG) and the 2016 Special Issue on gender co-edited by Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger in the *Nationalities Papers: Journal of Nationalist and Ethnicity*.

[3] For the concept of in-bodiment, see Svetlana Peshkova, *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* (Syracuse University Press, 2014). See also Abdugafurova's article in this Issue.

What Is Special about This Special Issue

This Special Issue is an important intervention into existing scholarly analyses of Central Asia in several ways. First, by using gender as a lens towards an understanding local social complexity, this Issue's contributors take the vehicles of knowledge production pertaining to Central Asia (e.g., research, publications, film, artistic performances) beyond politicized and reductionist approaches to theorizing about the region. Such narrow approaches include the "women's question" and/or "Islamic revival," and an analytical scaling down of complex local human relations to a dominance/submission model (as in "men" over "women" and/or "Islam" over "its regional subjects"). Second, the lens deployed by this Issue's contributors clarifies the gendered nature of local nationalisms and re-traditionalizing projects in each of the region's countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.[7] Third, this Issue's contributions demonstrate that "thinking *with* gender" is an important analytical move. The authors recognize that analytical work is always already partial. Hence, this Issue aims to invite further conversations, not postulate universal truths and/or (simply) offer generalizations.

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[4] Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2015); Nick Megoran, "Theorizing Gender, Ethnicity and the Nation-State in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (1999); Marianne Kamp, "Women's Studies and Gender Studies in Central Asia: Are We Talking to One Another?," *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (2009).

[5] Greta Olson and Mirjam Horn-Schott, "Introduction: 'Beyond Gender: Towards a Decolonized Queer Feminist Future'," in *Beyond Gender: Futures of Feminist and Sexuality Studies – An Advanced Introduction*, ed. Greta Olson et al. (Routledge Press, 2018).

[6] Joanna Pares Hoare, "Doing gender activism in a donor-organized framework: Constraints and opportunities in Kyrgyzstan," Nationalities papers 44, no. 2 (2016), 292. Also see Svetlana Peshkova, "Thinking with Gender about Central Asia," in *Handbook on Contemporary Central Asia*, ed. Erika Marat and Rico Issacs (Routledge Press, 2021), 362–78.

Fourth, heeding Madina Tlostanova's call for a critical reflection on the state of the "non-European post-Soviet former colonies," this Issue demonstrates how and in what ways the former Soviet borderlands, such as Central Asia, contribute to deconstructing the binary gender order and re-thinking gender not as a category per se but as a site of *intersections* of sexuality, ethnicity, racialization, ability, class, religion, history, law, economy, politics, and art.[8] Fifth, as a platform to showcase research by local scholars, this Issue's papers undo the "subject/object" and "researcher/researched" dichotomy, which contributes to decolonizing post-Soviet/former-Soviet history.[9] Sixth, as an example of publicly engaged scholarship, this Issue highlights the importance of collaboration not only between local and non-Central-Asian scholars and graduate students (at the time of the articles' submission), but more importantly, among activists, artists, and scholars. We started this collaboration through the three Zoom-enabled-workshops at the end of 2020 and continued this dialogue through a subsequent peer review of our papers and cross-referencing each other's work in our papers prior to the blind peer review. Finally, this Issue's contributions demonstrate that even though the dynamics of gender differences and inequalities in Central Asia must be contextualized vis-à-vis the specific modalities of local postcolonial and post-Socialist modernity/modernities, this region is not exceptional when it comes to the efforts to normalize local gender order, while this binary is continuously challenged. On the other hand, precisely because of the region's historical and epistemic location and constitution, the Central Asian cases featured in the Issue stand to provide a significant contribution to the existing theory of gender at large.

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[7] This Issue's coverage of Turkmenistan is very limited in scope. Gender continues to be a highly politicized research category in the region and in other former-Soviet borderlands and affiliated territories. Some countries allow more independent research on gender than others.

[8] Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean To Be Post-Soviet: Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire* (Duke University Press, 2018), 6.

[9] See Dan Healey and Francesca Stella, "Sexual and gender dissent in the USSR and post-Soviet space," *Cahiers du monde russe* 62, nos. 2–3 (2021): 225–50.

A Full Disclosure

There are several important standpoints that we want to disclose to the readers. We agree and know the following.

1. The former-Soviet (and/or post-Soviet and/or post-Socialist) Central Asia is always (already) defined from elsewhere; it is a Eurocentric geopolitical concept that implies a certain understanding of space and temporality and unequal global power dynamics, particularly when it comes to knowledge production.
2. The knowledge produced *about* Central Asia dominates the knowledge produced *by* Central Asians. In terms of agency and epistemic basis, Euro-American-Russia-centric analyses of the region and its inhabitants tend to prevail. This Issue's contributions challenge such analyses and representations.
3. Our analyses also demonstrate that using gender as a lens on human diversity is an option; there are other lenses, such as class, to think with. We use a gender lens to provide a detailed and complex picture of local daily lives and histories.
4. As contributors, we chose Central Asia as a referent for the five former Soviet Socialist Republics, which are now more than 30-year-old independent sovereign nation-states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.
5. Several of us were born and raised in these five countries, and the others hail from other parts of the (former) Soviet Union and/or North America but either currently reside and/or conduct long-term research in these countries. We also hail from different disciplines and educational backgrounds, and several of us are socio-political activists and artists.

While recognizing our differences and capitalizing on some of them, we intended to add to the production of knowledge through rethinking our pasts, reimagining our futures, and inviting further dialogue about local socio-historical and gendered complexity and diversity and about particularities and commonalities, changes, and continuities when it comes to gender regimes in Central Asia and elsewhere.

Gender Order

In human societies, one's behavioral and attitudinal traits are thought to be determined by either a discourse on science (e.g., biology), and/or by transcendental powers (e.g., "god"), and/or by culture (e.g., ethnos, a concept implying a nation's peculiar primordial characteristics), and/or all the above. The ways these behavioral and attitudinal differences are articulated and understood emerge from within and vis-à-vis particular socio-cultural contexts rather than being determined by biology, creator(s), and/or culture (e.g., cultural determinism). These differences are learned by humans while becoming gendered members of a society through *enculturation*, a process of becoming social and gendered members of a society. This process continues throughout one's life with a set of different(ial) standards applied to being male or female or any other gender category. These standards include behavioral expectations, such as clothes, hairstyles, language, manners and mannerisms, jobs, sports, and sexual desires thought to be appropriate for a particular gender category.

Human communities recognize two or more contextually defined gender categories, which are used to differentiate among humans according to such criteria as sexual orientation, preference in behavior, occupation, standards of beauty, dress code, presence and/or grouping of certain biological and physiological characteristics, or any combination of the above. Further, gender is not just a noun but also a verb. One's gender is enacted always in a socio-historical context through quotidian practices of daily life: one *does* gender daily by expressing it symbolically (e.g., by dress code) vis-à-vis social expectations that reflect a prevalent organization of gender relations in a society, or a local gender order. In turn, this gender order provides a context and resources for dominant discourses on how to feel and act as a gendered being, including behaviors, practices, expressions of sexuality, and moral standards.

In Central Asia, as in other parts of the former-Soviet space, local gender orders – prevalent organizations of gender relations in a society – are (mostly) binary. They are limited to two categories: "women" and "men." This binary gender order, however, is ideological rather than empirical. In daily conversations, many Central Asians may use such statements as "this is how Central Asian women are," or "this is how Central Asian men are," implying a homogeneity of experience within a gender category. Yet there is a great experiential and empirical variation in whether and how one is male or female: local socio-cultural expectations and degrees of personal power and control differ not only between, but also *among*, women and men, often as a scaled hierarchy.[10] As elsewhere, there is also a variation of and power relations among femininities (how one is female) and masculinities (how one is male). For example, a mother-in-law is often expected to be (and is) in charge of her daughter(s)-in-law, and a mother is understood to control a pre-menarche girl, while a father is understood to control his son(s) and is himself controlled by elderly male and female relatives. Further, both historical and contemporary local variations in gender identity and expression demonstrate that the binary gender order does not accurately describe human history and diversity in the region.

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[10] For example, we can think of a scaled hierarchy of such femininities as pre-menarche girls, menstruating young women, mothers of a girl/girls, mothers of a boy/boys, and post-menopausal women. The same goes for hierarchies and power relations among such male social positions as pre-circumcised boys, circumcised young men, husbands/fathers, and grandfathers/elderly men.

Several articles in this Issue display evidence that gender variance continues to be a part of local communities: any (dominant) gender order is always already contested. Empirically and experientially, there are always those who do not fit within the normative binary logic behind such gender order in terms of their bodies, desires, and behaviors. Many Central Asians continue to explain differences among humans by reference to biology, tradition, and/or religion; individual behaviors, desires, and practices of human coupling are thought to be determined by biology and/or ontology. These assumptions, in turn, inform and support the dominant view that "men" and "women" are created as different species and exist to be sexually paired, reinforcing the binary gender order. Those who do not fit neatly into this order are often considered to be socially deviant and must find creative ways to negotiate their difference vis-à-vis their social context to have (and lead) livable, meaningful, and dignified lives. Some individuals act *as if* they fit and conform to the dominant binary categories. Others continue to conceal their sexual desires and/or adopt a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Yet others resist and confront the existing gender order in hopes of changing it, and/or immigrate from the region.

This Issue's contributions show how the current regional gender order is informed by the Russian imperial and Soviet state-centered efforts to remake the existing (at the time) social structures in Central Asia.[11] Among other things, these efforts were meant to erase the precolonial non-binary (not limited to "women" vs. "men" only) gender positions or models of and for masculinity and femininity distinct from manhood or womanhood.[12] A detour into regional history and the current empirical variation in gender identity and expression demonstrates that a non-binary gender order is not just possible but haunts the existing binary gender order every step of the way. In other words, the current gender order is but one example of what a dominant gender order in the region was and can be.

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[11] Imperial Russia's own encounter with other European empires and their taxonomies and ideas about morality, sexuality, difference, and deviance informed Russian colonial encounters in Central Asia as well as efforts to change local mores and lifeways.

[12] "Models for" reflect social expectations dominant in a particular socio-cultural context, whereas "models of" reflect a variation and individual embodiment of such expectations. Gender structures among the nomadic and semi-nomadic populations of Central Asia might have been very different from those in the settled communities.

In the next section, we highlight this Issue's contributions, and we then put forward several suggestions for future research and collaborative knowledge production in the region and elsewhere.

Optional vs. Universal: Dynamic Gender Orders

In the twentieth century, scholarly research and writing about gender was mainly limited to a discussion of Central Asian women's social roles and patriarchy. In the twenty-first century, international and Central Asian scholars have become more attuned to using gender as an analytical lens on the diversity of human experiences, including various models of and for masculinity, femininity, and a discussion of other gender identities and gendered relations and discourses in view of colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and neoliberalism.[13] This wealth of research material amassed over the period of more than one hundred years makes it evident that gender orders are dynamic and change over time.

We take social history as a guiding principle for this Issue's contents. The contributors' analyses allow the readers to see local gender order as dynamic and embedded in two different colonial processes – the Russian imperial and the Soviet one – each of them promoting a different vision of modernity. At the same time, the articles demonstrate how contemporary local understandings of gender norms and roles continue to be informed by those colonial idea(l)s of modernity and social conformity, despite local scholars' and politicians' consistent criticism of the Russian imperial and Soviet colonial past: local nationalist efforts and nationalizing regimes fail to critically interrogate their own colonial biases.[14] The authors situate Central Asian societies within a contemporary global value system that consecrates individualism and self-expression, and cover a historical period starting with the imperial Russian conquest of the region into the present day, the second decade of the twenty-first century. More historical research and critical historiography are needed to fully comprehend local gender orders preceding the one informed by Russian imperial control; in short, the precolonial gender order is yet to be carefully explored. We offer a trajectory for research to this end later in this introductory article.

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[13] For example, Samuel Buelow, "The Paradox of the Kyrgyz Crossdressers: Ethnonationalism and Gender Identity in Central Asia" (PHD dissertation Indiana University, 2016); Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation: Gender and politics of dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016); Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2010); Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, *The Re-Islamization of Society and the Position of Women in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2008); Douglas Taylor Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Madeleine Reeves, "Migratsiia, maskulinnost' i transformatsii sotsial'nogo prostranstva v doline Sokh, Uzbekistan" [Migration, Masculinity, and Transformaton of the Social in the Sokh Valley in Uzbeksitan], *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4 (2012); Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "Between the state and the artist: Representations of femininity and masculinity in the formation of ideas of the nation in Central Asia," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016); Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, "Borrowing and Imitation in Post-Soviet Trans Activisms," in *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities*, ed. Ana Cristina Santos Zowie Davy, Chiara Bertone, Ryan Thoreson, and Saskia E. Wieringa (Sage Publications Ltd., 2020).

Douglas Northrop poignantly argued that "the apparent fixity of gender categories … only obscures the cultural work that is always under way to defend and retain them"; any social regime produces dominant invariable images of feminine and masculine behavior and generates stereotypes in "an attempt to fix identities and forestall" inevitable changes.[15] The changes in local gender order reflected the Russian colonial regime's interventions in juristic, political, socio-cultural, religious, and gender structures that reflected the values of European modernity (e.g., a female spouse as her husband's companion). The Russia's military conquest of Central Asia started in 1864 with the occupation of Chimkent, a city which was part of the Khoqand Khanate (1709–1876), one of the three political entities at that time in Turkestan.[16] By 1880, the Khoqand Khanate was fully occupied, while the other two main centers of power – the Khiva Khanate (1511–1920) and the Emirate of Bukhara (1785–1920) – existed as Russia's protectorates.[17] Images of local oppressed women and oppressive men that dominated the discourse of remaking Central Asian societies by Russian (and later Soviet) colonial regimes might have created an impression of a binary, uncomplicated gender order in early colonial Turkestan.[18] In this Issue, the article by SvetLana Peshkova, Ruthia Jenrbekova, and Maria Vilkovisky, alongside the one by Feruza Aripova, demonstrates that the early

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[14] Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

[15] Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 26.

[16] Nadira A. Abdurakhimova, "The Colonial System of Power in Turkistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002).

[17] Vladimir Bobrovnikov, "Islam in the Russian Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Russia: Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge University Press), 210.

[18] Turkestan (sometimes spelled as Turkistan) is a term introduced and used by colonial authorities vis-à-vis the eventually colonized territory of Central Asia.

Russian colonial gender order was markedly non-binary and different from the Russian imperial and later the Soviet one. In settled communities, this gender order included "males," "females," and *bach*[*ch*]*a*.[19] Often described as tender, gentle, beautiful, seductive, and sensual, *bachas* ("boys and youths") received wide admiration from both men and women for their beauty, aesthetic qualities, and performance skills.[20] These two articles provide insights into Russian imperial, Soviet, and, later, post-Soviet efforts to erase such historical and existing non-binary gender positions which were not limited to "women" vs. "men" only. Both articles complement recent efforts to decolonize queer history and challenge the existing assumptions about Russian and Soviet modernities, both as concepts linked to a certain understanding of social (and societal) progress and on the level of lived experiences.[21]

Peshkova, Jenerbekova, and Vilkovsky's article reflects on gender as the intersection of art, sexuality, colonialism, and the effects of Russian and Soviet modernities in the region. These authors' analysis allows the reader to see the region as more complicated, diverse, and dynamic, while demonstrating how local histories and stories about gender variance can become indigenous resources to challenge the selective deployment of local traditions in the articulation and enactment of the contemporary gender order in the region. They demonstrate that the early Russian colonial Turkestan, in addition to ontological and physiological characteristics, and/or sexual preferences, local gender order was based on a more complex gender structure, which reflected such categories as occupation, artistic ability, age, and beauty. Their critical historiography of several sources (from the 1870s to the 2020s) shows that a rigid gender dichotomy and the binary logic behind it advocated for by local nationalists during the second decade of the twenty-first century is not a default gender structure but an option. They argue that current attempts to impose a rigid binary gender order on local populations are as colonial as the Russian and Soviet colonial attempts to remake Central Asian communities; both colonial and current nationalist efforts to normalize the binary gender order are doomed to fail. *Bacha*, as a gender position and socio-cultural institution not reduced to sexuality, is but one example of such efforts' futility. In their analysis, the authors trace how, while adapting to a changing socio-political context, *bacha* did not disappear. Rather, over time, this institution *prevratilos'* (has transformed) into something else.

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[19] In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the alternative renderings in English of the local terms for *bacha* (adolescent feminine male performers) include *bachcha* (Cyr. бачча), *bachi*, *bacheh-baazi*, and *batcha*. The term *bachi* can signal a plural form of *bacha*. To avoid confusion, we use the ending "s" to signal a plural form of the word, as in *bachas*.

[20] For example, Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Scibner, Armstrong & Co., printed by John F. Trow & Son, 1877); V. Nalivkin and M. Nalivkina, *Muslim Women of the Ferghana Valley: A 19th-Century Ethnography from Central Asia by Vladimir Nalivkin and Maria Nalivkina*, trans. Mariana Markova and Marianne Kamp (Indiana University Press, 2016 [1886]).

[21] See Healey and Stella, "Sexual and gender dissent in the USSR and post-Soviet space."

Aripova's article centers on gender as an intersection of sexual ideologies, colonialism, and law in Uzbekistan. The author links the criminalization of same-sex practices in 1926 to the contemporary renunciation of the queer past by the nationalist narratives supported and/or produced by the Uzbek state. By focusing on gender and sexual ideologies' role in the transition between the Russian imperial regime and the Bolshevik program of modernization in Central Asia, this article uncovers gendered and homophobic tropes associated with building an Uzbek Soviet and post-Soviet modernity. The author demonstrates how the women's liberation campaign (*hujum*, also known in Russian as *raskreposchenie* and/or *emansipatsia zhenshin*) coincided with the early criminalization of male same-sex practices (*muzhelozhstvo*) in 1926 in the Uzbek Socialist Republic.[22] This process exemplified a dual burden of Soviet modernity, whereby women's emancipation came with the erasure of sexual ambivalence and same-sex practices, particularly in the periphery of the Soviet empire (e.g., Azerbaijan and the Caucasus region). Aripova also shows how the process of constructing a new historical memory that came with the emergence of Uzbekistan as an independent nation-state continues to exclude women's voices insisted on and expressed through the Soviet liberation campaign and renounce Uzbekistan's queer prerevolutionary past.

Previous scholarly analyses have described a variety of models for and of femininity and masculinity in Russian colonial Turkestan that reflected one's social standing, religiosity, geographic location, and social differentiations, such as class and education.[23] Donohon Abdugafurova's article continues this research trajectory by treating gender as an intersection of local systems of social differentiation, such as racialization, class, and dis/ability. Although racializing Central Asian populations has been one of the main characteristics of Russian and Soviet imperial modernity, as a particular system of internal social differentiation, racialization has also existed among locals prior to colonialism. Through a critical analysis of Anbar Otin's (1870–1915) writings, the author offers a complex view of the local system of racialization during the first decade of the twentieth century. This system reflected indigenous understandings of social hierarchies (e.g., religious status, nobility) and not (just) the Russian imperial categories applied to the local population.[24]

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[22] For an engaging analysis of the Soviet gender order that reviews primary sources, see Tatsyana Shurko, "'Zhenshini Vostoka: Sovetskij Gendarnij Poryadok v Centralnoj Azii mezhdu kolonizatsiej i imansipatsiej" [Women of the East: Soviet Gender Order in Central Asia between Colonization and Emancipation], in *Ponyatiya o Sovetskom v Centralnoj Azii* [An understanding of the Soviet in Central Asia], ed. Mamedov, Georgij, and Oksana Shatalova (Shtab Press), 178–209.

[23] "Models for" reflect social expectations dominant in a particular socio-cultural context, whereas "models of" reflect a variation and individual embodiment of such expectations. For resources on female same-sex desire and practices, see Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, 81; on the diversity of models for and of femininity, see Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 42–43; Marianne R. Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, WA University of Washington Press, 2006).

Anbar Otin, a thinker, and writer in Turkestan's Muslim society, engaged these issues in her manuscript, *Risolai Falsafai Siyohon* [The Treatise on the Philosophy of the Blacks]. This manuscript offers invaluable information about her life and her critical thinking about local racialization. Abdugafurova argues that Anbar Otin, disabled since the early adulthood, treats *siyohon* (blacks) as both a color and social position used in reference to the "ordinary people" of Turkestan, their frustrated hopes, and their pain. While racializing locals has been used to differentiate and discriminate against Turkestan's population by the colonial powers, in Anbar Otin's writings, *siyohon* (blackness) takes on a different meaning; it refers to "ordinary people" and has a positive connotation of inner and physical beauty. As a result, Abdugafurova's work contributes directly to scholarly understandings of racialization and disability – both much understudied topics when it comes to Central Asia. This article serves as an important example of what and how we can learn about local women's lives and the scaled social hierarchy women were faced with in the early 1900s.

Snejanna Atanova's article about visual gendered propaganda through arts and crafts, a powerful tool in spreading new ideas and practices in Soviet Central Asia, is particularly instructive of the efforts to change local social structure. Posters and textiles created in the 1920s and 1930s, currently held by some Azerbaijani, Turkmen, and Russian museums, called on local populations to join the struggle for "a new and happy" socialist life. Atanova's article focuses on posters and textiles created for women and with the participation of women. The author argues that when read critically, with the aim of "deciphering," these visual artifacts and the stories inscribed in them help to recreate a multidimensional picture of Soviet history. The materiality of gendered discourses is rarely featured in the analyses of Central Asia. Atanova's study of these artifacts shows how grassroots narratives on local gender norms and roles continue to be located at an intersection of daily life, ideology, invented tradition, modernity, and national and supranational interests and influences.

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[24] From the end of the eighteenth century, those populations who existed outside of the imperial control and/or who visited or resided in its periphery have been variously referred to as *inorodtsi*, *tuzemtsi*, and/or *inovertsi*. *Tuzemtsi* as a category continued to permeate Russia's judicial and administrative language until the early twentieth century. This category delineated periphery's populations not only as different but also as deficient in terms of social structure, including political, religious, and economic development.

The effects of the Russian imperial remaking of Turkestan on local gender structure were not as critical as the ones that were to follow in the second decade of the twentieth century. The transformation of the Central Asian gender order continued with the Soviet state's codification of gender relations along the lines of a dichotomous, markedly non-religious gender structure. Since Russia's colonial dichotomous gender structure was adopted wholesale by the Bolshevik (Communist) organizers, their contempt for local gender diversity led to the elimination of the *bacha* gender identity *de jure* (see Peshkova, Jenerbekova, and Vilkovsky's and Aripova's articles in this Issue). The colonial criticism of gender segregation as an index of the natives' unenlightened behavior became increasingly loud in the Bolshevik (Communist) organizers' speeches, which called for the liberation of local women from their dependence on their families and husbands. This call promoted heterosocializing (socializing with the opposite gender), which, at the time, was deemed rather inappropriate in many settled Central Asian communities. A focus on heterosocializing also meant to encourage women to join the wage labor force necessary for Soviet state-building. Educational and cultural campaigns, along with legal injunctions that followed this call, did not make women independent agents but instead reallocated their dependence from the immediate family to the (Soviet) state. By rewarding their reproductive labor with maternity leaves and free childcare, the Soviet state rendered women "more amendable to the state's control," and as the main caretakers of their children, husbands, and extended families, women could extend the state's control to their offspring and spouses.[25]

The Soviet organizers' focus on transforming the gender order as a way of changing the Central Asian social structure meant to delink women's (economic) dependence from (male members of) their families. This gendered configuration, in turn, solidified a model of parental and spousal responsibilities that undermined fatherhood, glorified motherhood (e.g., through the state's financial assistance, preferential custody, maternity leave), and distanced fathers from parental responsibilities toward children and sharing household chores with their wives.[26] The perceived erosion of men's authority and inability to provide for their families was seen as an adverse effect of the USSR's female emancipation campaigns and even became the object of debates in the Soviet press.[27] After independence, the collapse of Central Asian economies and the retreat of the state's involvement in the provision of social services contributed to redefining marriage, family relations,[28] and gender roles and gave the opportunity (and burden) to men to reaffirm their role as "providers," as Commercio's paper in this Issue demonstrates. A strategic placement of gender at the center of Central Asia's social transformation further politicized gender roles and women's rights but did little to challenge male primacy associated with in-family and societal leadership.[29] The effects of these changes are manifested in the current nationalizing policies in the post-Soviet countries (e.g., for Tajikistan, see Nozimova's article in this issue; for Kyrgyzstan, see Kim, Molchanova and Orozalieva's article in this Issue).

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[25] Sarah Ashwin (ed.), Gender, State, and Society on Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia (New York, NY: Routledge 2000), 10. Svetlana Peshkova, "Thinking with Gender about Central Asia." In Handbook on Contemporary Central Asia, edited by Erika Marat and Rico Issacs (Routledge Press, 2021). Pp. 362–378.

Although the effects of Soviet modernization on the gendered lives of Central Asian populations varied, as a continuing legacy of the Soviet Union, the existing gender order in the region continues to be nation-state-centered and reflects a dichotomous gender structure. While motherhood is glorified, same-sex desires and practices are still criminalized and medicalized in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and stigmatized in other countries. Biological reproduction is still (minimally) rewarded by the states in the form of "mother's capital" and paid leave for pregnant females from work for a period of gestation, delivery, and postnatal childcare; the amount of money and paid time off work varies from country to country.[30] These strategies also ensure that day-to-day child and family care and childrearing remain mainly mothers' responsibilities, while fathers' participation in parenthood is often reduced to economic provisioning and their role as disciplinarians. While in both the Soviet and the current Central Asian gender orders, the normative model for femininity centers on motherhood as the pinnacle of female humanity, in the former order, motherhood was also a duty to the state, not only to the family. This notion persists in the rhetoric and policies of current nationalizing regimes. By increasing the importance of motherhood in the dominant model for femininity, in a way, the current gender order undermines previously established feminine gender models, such as those offered by female politicians, soldiers, workers, and sportswomen. Three papers in this Special Issue speak directly to this dynamic: the one that is co-authored by Elena Kim, Elena Molchanova, and Rizvana Orozalieva, the second one by Shahnoza Nozimova, and the third by Michele Commercio.

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[26] This model has changed during the Soviet period by encouraging less or more emotional engagement with the kids on the part of "the Soviet father." See, for example, Helene Carlback, "Fatherly Emotions: in Soviet Russia," *Baltic Worlds* 1–2 (2017).

[27] Sarah Ashwin, *Gender, State, and Society on Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, 17.

[28] Juliette Cleuziou and Julie McBrien, "Marriage Quandaries in Central Asia," *Oriente Moderno* 100 (2021): 121–46.

[29] Marianne Kamp, "The Soviet Legacy and Women's Rights in Central Asia," *Current History* 115, no. 783 (2016).

[30] Sophie Roche, "A sound family for a healthy nation: motherhood in Tajik national politics and society," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016).

A complex colonial history still haunts the current gender order in Central Asia. While Abdugafurova's article explores corporeality and models of femininity from a historical standpoint linking spirituality, racialization, and disability, the article by Kim, Molchanova, and Orozalieva reminds the reader that contemporary local discourses on gender are not just embodied (enacted) by local people. Like Abdugafurova, they show how these discourses are also in-bodied (lived and felt within a physical body) during the second decade of twenty-first-century Kyrgyzstan.[31] Focusing on corporeality, the authors provide an important contribution to understanding gender as an intersection of sexuality and nationalism. In their article, the authors explore existing systems of social control over women's bodies in Kyrgyzstan as exemplified by discourses and practices regulating female virginity. They conceptualize the emergence of these discourses as shaped by Kyrgyzstan's continued post-independence nation-building processes and the ensuing dynamics of constructing national ideologies. These ideologies have embraced the neo-familial idea(l)s about men, women, and the family in the efforts to disidentify with the Soviet legacy of sexual egalitarianism. Women's roles in Kyrgyz society became central to political debates in which women's bodies featured as symbolic of not only women's position within the newly independent state but also of the nature of national and ethnic identity. By analyzing the debates about women's reproductive rights and women's dress, the authors show how women's bodies have become sites of political contestation, ethnic nationalism, collective power, and individual resistance. Practices to control women's premarital virginity, the authors argue, contribute to these processes, while young Kyrgyz women, in their attempts to undermine patriarchal oppression, employ coping strategies that may perpetuate this oppression.

By focusing on contemporary Tajikistan, where the onus of national identity production (and reproduction) has been disproportionately placed on women,

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[31] For an example of the use and theorizing of "inbodiment," see Peshkova, *Women Islam and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan*.

Shahnoza Nozimova's article continues a discussion of gender as an intersection of nationalism with models for a patriotic womanhood and authentic religiosity expressed through tangible reproductive, behavioral, and sartorial practices. In Tajikistan, decisions about female bodies, their dress code, and the women's roles in the public and private spaces, serve as important differentiating markers and mobilization tools for the competing nationalistic ideological forces. Using insights from the scholarship on nation-building and gender, Nozimova explores the government's nationalist discourse on Tajikistani women. Official documents, government publications, speeches of various officials, and media sources demonstrate that contemporary nation-building has become about tangible lifestyles. The Tajikistani government directly links women's social and reproductive behavior and sartorial choices to the ideas and practices of national belonging and nationhood. In this state-promoted imagination, women reproduce the Tajik nation by performing three major tasks: they bear, rear, and wear the Tajik nation-state.

This Issue's direct contribution to gender theory is not only in its focus on gender diversity, variations of local femininities, and gendered nationalism, but also in its discussion of local masculinities explored previously by a handful of scholars.[32] Both Soviet and current Central Asian gender orders assume a normative masculinity that reflects a male's duty to provide for the family. In the former order, financial provisioning was a state's duty as a response to its citizens' (females' and males') active participation in social transformation through wage labor, whereas in the current one, it is a duty of a proper Muslim man and his traditional responsibility toward his family and the nation. In the contemporary gender order, normative masculinity, not the state, is tasked with physical and symbolic protection of and provisioning for the family. Further, since any gender order comes with dominant discourses on how to feel and how to be a gendered being as well as a system of morality, the appeal to religious sensibilities increased the importance of such values as privacy, honor, shame, purity, chastity, and respectability; these potent cultural values lace the models for normative femininity and masculinity. In turn, these morally charged dominant gender models erase gender variance, overshadow a diversity of existing femininities and masculinities, and obscure existing power relations and hierarchies among them. These power relations and hierarchies are further complicated by one's ethnicity, class, access to education, mobility, religiosity, ability, migration, and/or geographic location.

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[32] For example, see Colette Harris, "State business: Gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011); Ulan Bigozhin, "'Where is our Honor?' Sports, Masculinity, and Authority in Kazakhstani Islamic Media," *Central Asian Affairs* 6 (2019); Eeva Keskula, "Oasis in the steppe: Health and masculinity of Kazakhstani miners," *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018); Hélène Thibault, "Labour migration, sex, and polygyny: Negotiating patriarchy in Tajikistan," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 15 (2018): 2809–26; Hélène Thibault, "Mnogozhenstvo v Kazakhstane," *Edu.e-history.kz* 3, no. 27 (2022).

While demonstrating the intersection of gender, power, and ideology, Commercio's article centers on a particular model of masculinity in Kyrgyzstan – depleted masculinity – as expressed by polygynous males (i.e., those married to more than one person). The author argues that a *nastoiashchii muzhik*'s (real man's) sense of masculinity is depleted when one of its crucial attributes (in this case, earning wages) disappears but other crucial attributes (such as governing the family and the state) remain. Adverse consequences of Kyrgyzstan's economic development during the last thirty years laid the roots for the emergence of depleted masculinity among some men in the country. By analyzing gender stereotypes held by a small subset of local polygynous men, the author offers a glimpse into familial and societal roles these men think they should play, as well as familial and societal roles these men think local women should play. Commercio's focus on subjective interpretations of "traditional" gender roles sheds light on an existing model of expected masculinity and femininity necessary for an understanding of the complex dynamics of daily life and social transformation in the region.

Hélène Thibault's article continues studies of the current gender order by incorporating an important dimension of local populations' daily lives: an online (digital) one. This article exemplifies thinking with gender as an intersection of economy, sexuality, and dominant cultural models for masculinity and femininity. While several articles in this Issue focus on issues of re-traditionalization and the conservative character of gender relations that negatively affect women and those who live against the gender binary, this article addresses an unexplored aspect of gender dynamics in Kazakhstan: women's consumption of male sex work. Male sex work and the underlying desire for emancipation and sexual satisfaction question dominant models of femininity and masculinity, as well as local assumptions about human coupling and normative sexuality. Thibault shows that unlike male sex work around the world, the Kazakhstani market appears to offer overwhelmingly heterosexual services. By acknowledging a shift in local gender roles and expectations, the author argues that a desire for sexual emancipation which is constrained by conservative views surrounding female sexuality explains this particularity.

Highlighting the burden of nationalism in Central Asia on human bodies, sexuality, and gender identity and expression does not mean that local people are not responding to these dynamics or responding to them in a singular way. In-bodiment and embodiment of gendered expectations are agentive categories: they presuppose an active agent. Diverse forms of socio-political activism in Central Asia, resulting from these dynamics, has been documented by several recent studies.[33] Feminist activist organizers have been working against the binary gender order in the region for decades.[34] Victoria Kravtsova's article builds on the works by these local activist-scholars. In the article, the author analyses the ways local activists work on the intersection of gender justice and decolonization, situating (queer) feminism in the context of "neither postcolonial nor entirely post-Socialist" Central Asia. The specificity and variety of the experiences of feminist organizing in the former "second world" is rarely explored in studies of transnational feminist organizing. The (queer) feminist discourses of the region, described as the most "distant Other" of the former USSR – Central Asia – are often left unheard and unexamined. By looking at the ways artists, activists, and academics from Bishkek and Almaty articulate their understandings of feminism from intersectional and decolonial perspectives, Kravtsova argues that local (queer) feminist activists are producers of unique knowledge(s), bound neither to "return to tradition" nor to accept ready-made solutions from the "West." By engaging with the inner coloniality of the feminist movements in the former USSR, the article contributes to the transnational debates on the inclusivity of feminism(s), and it sheds much-needed light on the local queer activism.

The most important feature of the existing gender order in the region is the diversity of individual strategies of negotiating with it, to have meaningful and livable lives. To live with dignity may require political activism, migration, immigration, and/or engaging in sex work. Some Central Asians produce alternative discourses of empathy and support to those who transgress prevailing models for gendered behavior, while some local artists challenge existing nationalist ideologies by exposing gender struggles that are indigenous and relevant to twenty-first-century Central Asia. Remaining in the region, local LGBTQI* activists, and those who have (im)migrated, continue to politically organize to confront, directly or indirectly, the status quo of their contemporary binary gender order.[35] Some local women continue seeking employment inside and outside the region, while others desire to be free from wage labor. And while some local men prefer (and can afford) to spend most of their off-work free time socializing with their male friends, others dedicate themselves to childcare and household chores and co-ed political and social activism. There is no perfect analytical template that fits all when it comes to Central Asia.

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[33] For a recent example, see Svetlana Peshkova, "Central Asian Women's contextual politics: The case of Muslim women in Uzbekistan," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life* 14, no. 3 (2020).

[34] For a recent example, see Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fateful Feminnale: An insider's view of a 'controversial' feminist art exhibition in Kyrgyzstan," *Open Democracy* (2020), https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fateful-feminnale-an-insiders-view-of-a-controversial-feminist-art-exhibition-in-kyrgyzstan/. For historical examples of writing about feminist activism and as feminist scholars, see Anara Tabyshalieva, "Revival of Traditions in Post-Soviet Central Asia," in *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia* ed. Marnia Lazreg (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2000); Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, *Between the Slogans of Communism and the Laws of Islam* (Lahore, Pakistan: Shirkat Gah Publishers, 1995).

Going Forward

In our view, there are several areas that remain unexplored and could benefit from a gender lens when it comes to Central Asia. These include: (1) the dynamics of enslavement and its role in the precolonial gender order; (2) women's queer history and desires; (3) historical and contemporary ableism and disability; (4) intersection between human sexuality and living systems of spirituality (e.g., Islam, Bahá'í Faith); and (5) digital ethnography of the gender order in the twenty-first century. Below, we discuss three out of six research trajectories listed above, which scholars might find useful when it comes to expanding research areas that can benefit from a gender lens.

Precolonial Gender Order and Enslavement

One of the areas that remains unexplored and could benefit from a gender lens is the precolonial gender order and enslavement. The precolonial local gender order, including its gender variance, was complicated by the institution of slavery and by social differentiations, such as the categories *oq suyak* (white bone, noble) and *qoracha* (black bone, ordinary, plain) among local populations. There is a limited number of sources by locals about the precolonial gender order in the region, and the existing sources describe mainly elites and/or famous individuals. Local females had limited access to literacy, and written sources often outlived oral histories. Records of the voices of enslaved people are almost non-existent, except for rare mentions of them (as "slaves") in the travelogues and reports of others, often foreign dignitaries and visitors, and several interviews by Russian officials.[36] This lack of information about precolonial female histories and experiences and the institution of slavery makes the analysis of gender order difficult but not impossible. Roziya Mukminova suggested that to elucidate information about these often-absent voices, we must apply a critical analysis and reading to the existing sources (written works and artifacts) about men, politics, and the economy (e.g., *waqf* [endowed] properties).[37] These sources include European and non-European traders and travelers' travelogues.

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[35] We use * to signal that the terms of self-identification among local activists and those living against the binary gender order differ.

[36] Jeff Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2018).

These traders and travelers to the region left notes focusing on the lives of men, which one can use to elicit information about gender order in the region. For instance, a precolonial (tenth century) example of gender variance is evident in the Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's report about the region. In 921 CE, an author and member of the caliph al-Muqtadir (d. 932 CE) embassy to the king of the Bulghars on the Volga, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, travelled through Mawarannahr and Khorezm. He reported on the presence of same-sex desires and practices, abhorrent to him.[38] Said Gaziev notes that Babur (also known as Zahir al-Din Muhammad), one of the most prominent figures in Central Asian history, when sharing the details of his private life (905 Hijri [1499–1500 CE]), reported on his desire for and love of "a boy … 'Baburi.'"[39] While a score of children he fathered is celebrated in the current translations and iterations of his memoirs, "his first love" – 'Baburi' – is completely ignored.

Mukminova's work exemplifies how we can read art as a source of information about local gender order and roles. This scholar analyzed the Middle Ages miniatures reflecting locals' daily lives. Some of them depicted "not only beautiful girls – mistresses of leading figures and dancers – but also student girls taking instruction from their female teachers…; girls dressed as boys and playing *chougan* [polo] [and archery] with boys."[40] Hence, instances of what some scholars call *transvesti* (transvestism) were not unusual among some locals in fifteenth to eighteenth century.[41]

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[37] Roziya Mukminova, "Central Asia: 15th to Mid 18th Century," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi et al. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003): 82–4.

[38] Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Indiana University Press, 2010), 65–8.

[39] Said Gaziev, "Dancing Boys and Gay Escapades…," blog post on *Study Of Islam in Central Asia*, November 30, 2021, https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/dancing-boys-and-gay-escapades-in-fin-de-siecle-tashkent-a-sketch-from-a-queer-history-of-central-asia (accessed December 16, 2021). In the notes, Gaziev writes, "[i]n 2011 Baku edition of Baburname's translation into Russian by Mikhail Salye this 'embarrassing' passage was excised all together thus censoring the emperor himself. Zahiriddin Babur, *Baburname*. Baku, Nagyl Evi, 2011 p.113."

[40] Mukminova, "Central Asia: 15th to Mid 18th Century," 84.

[41] Olga Khoroshiulova, *Russkie Travesti: v istorii, kulture, i povsednevnosti* [Russians' transvestism in the history, culture, and daily life] (Moscow, Russia: Mann, Ivanov, and Ferber, 2021).

Mohan Lol, a Hindu traveler to Turkestan in the late 1830s, a vivid admirer of "British civilization," and a "Persian Secretary" of Alexander Burns (the East Indian Company's agent and spy), described the area as occupied by the "barbarous [Turkmen] race" trading enslaved people with (the emirate of) Bukhara.[42] His travelogue offers insights into local gender order and mores and includes information about social differentiation and hierarchy which included slavery. According to him, enslaved men and boys differed in age; some "were young and beautiful boys, others had long beards." The traveler found both enslaved boys and local women to be beautiful. While he describes local men as "gullible" and "dangerous," local women were "very handsome, fair, and of good size. Their dress, and even their bonnets, which resembled that of European ladies, added splendour [sic.] to their beauty." These and other cases exemplify that by applying a critical reading to the existing fragmentary narratives, we can gather important insights about slavery and local gender diversity within and among femininities, masculinities, and other gender identities at the time. And even though such depictions do not necessarily lead to a definitive image of the precolonial gender order, they show the futility of the binary-bound thinking about local societies when it comes to the embodiment of gender roles.

Women's Queer History and Desires

Gender dynamics are dialogical; stories about femininities and women can tell us about masculinities and men as well as about models of femininity and masculinity incongruent with manhood and womanhood (i.e., gender variance). Several recent publications are particularly instructive of how to apply this gender lens through a critical rereading of the primary and secondary historical sources about the region.[43] For instance, Anne Broadridge makes a case for rereading historical sources with a gender lens and shedding light on the obscured yet equally central roles of women in the formation and reproduction of the Mongol empire. Since stories about males and manhood can tell us about females and womanhood and gender variance, in the recent conversation with Scott Levi, we agreed that rereading – and rethinking with a gender lens – the existing rich primary works and artifacts can provide a wealth of information about gender order in precolonial Central Asia and beyond.[44] A critical rereading of the existing writings by Russian imperial authors against their moral judgement can shed light on the diversity of sexual desires and expression among local women and precolonial gender order. For instance, in 1891, V. U. Kushilevskij wrote about the practice of *bulgare* (sic.), which the author defines as "a perversion" among some local women akin to lesbianism in "civilized Europe". Kushilevskij clarifies that *bulgare* is a term of reference to women performing as males and penetrate the partner, while *bachaler* (sic.) – to women who are penetrated by the *bulgare*.[45] Although the author is writing during the first decade of the colonial rule, he refers to the reports about presence of such practices dating "long time ago."

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[42] Mohan Lal, "A Journey among the Turkmens," in *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, ed. Scott C. Levi and Sela Ron (Indiana University Press, 2010), 287, 289, 290.

[43] For example, Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Aziza Shanazarova, "A Female Saint in Muslim Polemics: Aghā-yi Buzurg and Her Legacy in Early Modern Central Asia," PhD dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2019.

Experimenting with different media, methods, and research designs, including critical fabulations, which combine critical theory with historical and archival research and fictional narratives, and overcoming art- and activism-blindness, can help shed light on the epistemic blind spots, such as local women's queer history and desires.[46] Afsaneh Najmabadi's 2005 analysis of gender dynamics in Qajar Iran is an important example of overcoming art-blindness and creating theory that matters; we cannot write/research history, activism, and the pursuit of living meaningful and dignified lives without creative imagination and looking at visual materials.[47] Mukminova's work, mentioned above, exemplifies how we can read art as a source of information about women's lives and history with insights about cross-dressing among local women. In short, to continue research about women's queer histories and desires, past and present, scholars need to utilize various resources, and art and artistic expression are among the important sources of information about this understudied area.

Digital Ethnography

Given the rate of penetration of cellular services in the region and young people's use of social media, engaging with digital ethnography is another promising avenue for understanding socio-political dynamics in Central Asia. The use of new information technologies and the digital era's increasing connectedness profoundly impact social dynamics, including gender dynamics such as marriage[48] and representations of femininity.[49] Even though "access to these technologies remains stratified by class, race, and gender,"[50] the exploration of the digital landscape can reveal the voices of those previously unheard. It might also reveal the increasing rural and urban divide and the differentiated lifestyles that ensue. In the urban centers of Central Asia, people enjoy greater financial independence and lessened social control, factors which enable them to live more independent lives in comparison to the tightly knit, poorly connected, and somewhat impoverished rural areas. By examining the idealized representations of individuals' lives coming into existence online, we might get a glimpse of how gender is performed and by whom the gender order is (or is not) contested. If social media is often used to challenge the socio-political order and resist oppressive practices, it can also be used as a disciplinary tool to enforce social norms and shame[51] individuals who do not conform to the dominant gender order.

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[44] Personal communication, 2021. For some primary sources, see Levi and Sela, *Islamic Central Asia*.

[45] V. U. Kushilevskij, *Materiali Dlya Meditsinskoj Geografii …* (Materials for medical geography and higenic description of Ferghana Oblast') (Novij Margeloan Ferganskaya Oblast', 1891).

[46] For a discussion of such a mixed-methods approach, see Peshkova, Jenerbekova, and Vilkovsky's article in this Issue.

[47] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (University of California Press, 2005); Beth Potier, "Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards," *Harvard Gazette*, March 14, 2002, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2002/03/women-with-mustaches-men-without-beards/ (accessed March 10, 2021).

Not the End

In this Issue, we have engaged in thinking with gender about a diversity of local lifeways. This approach is an option, not a requirement. But this option allowed us to offer thicker descriptions and analyses of local complex lives by shedding light on many blind spots screened out by a lack of such a focus. We call on other scholars, artists, and activists to engage in collaboration and dialogue, and, indeed, we welcome a rebuttal of our arguments.

Based on the experience of making this Special Issue, going forward, we would like to see more dialogue and collaboration among scholars, artists, and activists. Blurring the artificial divisions between art, theory, and activism is a productive move toward generating meaningful theory: theory that works and matters. Interdisciplinary, cross- and trans-disciplinary studies and research are important pathways enhancing our understanding of human existence. They should enable researchers of all walks of life to mix and match methods of research and analysis. It is equally important not to lose a site of praxis, since epistemology not only reflects but also informs our daily lives; this is what we mean by making theory that works and matters. Thinking with and moving beyond gender requires a wider dissemination of knowledge produced by us and about us in different languages to different audiences. We all should strive to do this better. Finally, we call for more reflection on researchers' positionality and situatedness. Such critical personal geolocation is necessary for rethinking our pasts, reimagining our futures, and inviting further dialogue about local socio-historical and gendered complexity and diversity in the region and beyond.

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[48] Jasmin Dall'Agnola and Hélène Thibault, "Online Temptations: Divorce and Extramarital Affairs in Kazakhstan," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 654.

[49] Aizada Arystanbek, *Trapped between East and West: A Study of Hegemonic Femininity in Kazakhstan's Online and State Discourses*, Master's thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2020; Diana Kudaibergenova, "The Body Global and the Body Traditional: A Digital Ethnography of Instagram and Nationalism in Kazakhstan and Russia," *Central Asian Survey* 38 (2019): 363–80.

[50] Dhiraj Murthy, "Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research," *Sociology* 42, no. 5 (2008): 837.

[51] Hélène Thibault and Jean-François Caron (eds.), *Uyat and the Culture of Shame in Central Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2022).

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