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Margins and centres: Gender and feminism in business history

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ABSTRACT

Gender and feminism are often described as being marginal to the pre-occupations that define the core of business history. Here we explore three possibilities that this framing suggests: first, that scholars of gender and feminism in business history are responsible for moving their work from margins to centre, becoming part of and perhaps changing the mainstream; second, that those working in the centre ought to expand their horizons to become more cognisant of feminism and gender; and third, the interpretation that we examine in detail here, that all working on historical analysis of business can rethink the distinction between the construction of core and periphery. This latter approach means actively challenging the maintenance of the centre/margin metaphor and its effects. We argue that this third approach would benefit all working in the field. Envisioning a more heterodox business history enables critical analysis of white, male, Anglocentric norms and values that have framed historical thinking in ways that exclude and produce partial, unsatisfactory, histories.

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Introduction

In early 2019 we framed a call for papers to bring gender and feminism from the periphery, or margins, to the mainstream, or centre, of business history. We used this metaphor because it has been common in feminist thinking for decades; bell hooks, in particular, built many of her key arguments around it (e.g. hooks, 2000). The metaphor captured our sense of the current positioning of gender and feminism and the on-going struggle to highlight biases and silences underlying historiographies and histories of business since the 1930s, when the battle for professional legitimacy began. The centre/margin metaphor is also a popular one in business history, most often deployed in considering the relationship of historical research to its larger cousin, management and organisation studies (see, for example, Üsdiken and Kipping's recent (2020) book length discussion of how history has informed and might further inform understandings of management and organisation, especially strategy).

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Authors are listed alphabetically, as we each contributed equally to the work involved in this special issue.

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We were confident that there were researchers who did not identify primarily as business history scholars but who, nonetheless, felt that they had projects that matched the aims of this journal and the field. A well-attended session on the topic at a British Academy of Management meeting had brought forward several inquiries about how feminist work might be incorporated into business history concerns. We anticipated three possible types of submissions: (1) scholars of gender and feminism who were committed to moving their work from the margins to the centre, making these concepts constitutive of business historical knowledge; (2) mainstream business scholars interested in expanding their analyses to include and incorporate business knowledge generated by historical outsiders and those on the margins of business history; (3) scholars from either group who would be interested in exploring, reassessing, and historicising the shifting power dynamics between the periphery and mainstream. And yet this was not a call that resulted in a rush of submissions, nor submissions in numbers that suggested business history was considered a sympathetic field for gender focussed and/or feminist work. It seemed that the centre of business history was not a centre that many gender scholars wished to move to, nor where the debates their work contributed to were likely to be engaged with. If there was a debate to be had, the debate needed to first problematise the centre/margins metaphor—in particular its gendered connotations.

The unequal business of knowledge production, communication and dissemination

The meanings associated with margins and centres changed as we began to question our individual understandings of those boundaries, and what they might mean for gender, feminism, and business history if the centre held or if its relationship to topics on the margin changed. We slowly concluded that generating answers was not the key task. We speculated, reading back into the classics most often cited as exemplars of gendered or feminist analysis, revisiting Wendy Gamber's work (1998), and then forward through the papers presented here as original new contributions that challenge, reopen, and advance understanding. These questions were sometimes surprising to us. For example, we asked whether more attention to gender and feminist theories would make business institutions more or less *loveable*? Would more attention to a wider variety of businesses and organisations, and to the experiences of women in business, make for a more or less male-friendly feminism? What if scholars of gender and feminism paid more attention to business and less to capitalism? Would the moral or ethical centre of feminism and gender scholarship change if it were more closely linked to profitable businesses, as some feminists have suggested (e.g. Aston & Bishop, 2020)? Would businesswomen be inclined to engage with feminism as a term and set of ideas, and self-identify as business creators, leaders, or owners, if their histories occupied more space in the centre? Would more men working as business scholars join the women who tend to occupy this space in asking different questions about the relationships between business women and men if the field bore more deeply into cultures for knowledge about business practices?

It is important to emphasise that we are not lone voices crying in a scholarly wilderness. Many scholars in allied fields, often women, have been re-thinking the changing relationships between margins and centres of their own disciplines, often building on vibrant empirical and theoretical developments in feminist thinking. Listen to demographer Wendy Sigle

(2021), whose questions parallel our own, asking how the 'view from the margins' has changed, and why most working in her field still seem to hold to basic assumptions that no longer hold. We also lean on some of the many arguments of feminist theorists and activists. The late bell hooks' command of intersectional analysis informed and sharpened our critiques. Her attention to the differences between writing from and about the margins, confirmed and elaborated by the scholarship of Farhana Sultana (2021), made us more cognisant of how marginality is reproduced, and various positionalities are maintained. We examined the implications of Sara Ahmed's self-identification as a 'feminist killjoy' (2017), encouraging us to feel humour as well as frustration as we surveyed these fields, and reconsidered the position of feminist scholarship in mainstream history departments and business schools. We explored the different arguments that Joan Scott (1999, 2011) and Natalie Davis (1982, 1988) developed to examine what gendered margins and centres mean in the social construction of knowledge in history.

We learned from and talked about disappointments and surprises we experienced as the editorial process unfolded. In some cases the surprises were the disappointments: the scarcity of submissions from and engagement with business, gender and/or feminism in Asia and the Global South; a focus on the more current and contemporary rather than on the past; the conflation of gender with women; the inattention to race; the lack of, or unfamiliarity with, existing data sets about income inequalities and rates of labour force participation, business ownership and entrepreneurship; inattention to non-western feminisms, especially decolonial, indigenous, and black feminisms, as well as business oriented or market feminisms.

Yet, as the four accepted submissions and our compressed reading of them makes clear, there is reason to be optimistic about the future of this way of seeing business history. What many regard as the margins of business history proved to be among the most productive areas for historical analysis, repeatedly challenging what the practice of both business and history can be, demonstrating the possibility of different conversations and knowledges.

Without some general idea of changing disciplinary margins and centres, scholars of business are often forced to play defence. This editorial team has chosen to play offence, especially at a time when non-business publics are demanding greater moral clarity and accountability from businesses that they love to hate. Gender and feminism make new conversations about business worth listening to, regardless of where authors and readers stand. Each of the articles presented here supports an intent to ensure these conversations are a new type of half-time show in an established field of play, a challenge that does more than momentarily divert and entertain.¹

Different ways of doing gender, being feminist, and understanding business

This journal may be the first ever in this field to publish a special issue that combines themes of business, gender, and feminism, but this first mover status is not likely to hold for long. Special issues lose their specialness in two ways: they are either forgotten or their themes become an integrated part of scholarly practice. One gauge of the success of any special issue is the extent to which themes thread through subsequent issues and articles so that citations multiply across fields and conversations continue. This requires time and everyday academic work; it also demands that scholars and editors work hand

in hand to cross-fertilise and innovate. Citations multiply only when scholars remember and tend to them. Scholarly debate and generosity drives change in the philosophy of knowledge.

The four articles assembled here represent authorial contributions from scholars of management and critical management studies, early and modern European history, women's history, gender studies, and economic or business history. The different geographical and professional positionings of these scholars highlights challenges for a field whose historiographies and histories of shifting centres and margins are themselves indicators of the hierarchical unevenness of global business development and on-going struggles for gender equality.

We begin our commentary on the articles included in this Special Issue with a contribution that puts the journal itself at the centre of debate. Albert Mills and Kristin Williams argue that *Business History* is both 'key signifier' and 'gatekeeper' of a field whose definitions and demographics vary over time, critically surveying contributions to gender and published here between 2000–2020. They provide a basic quantification by identifying articles and book reviews during this period that they read as directly engaging with gender or feminism; they also briefly survey the content of those articles to differentiate more clearly what aspects of the gender, feminism, business triad are explored.

Their first observation from this is that their reading of the journal contents confirms what they describe as an "enduring neglect of a women's business history", with around 2% of full papers and 5% of book reviews qualifying under their reading. Two comparable journals, *Management and Organizational History* (MOH) and the *Journal of Management History* (JMH), are also surveyed for comparison in a briefer period, 2016–2020. Mills and Williams then build on these readings of knowledge in our field to restate an observation made a decade and a half earlier by the late Katrina Honeyman (2007) that business history, even more than business itself, is man-made.

Mills and Williams make a strong case for radical action, based in part on a feminist conviction that a male dominated, masculinist field requires change on many levels at once: in discursive norms that muffle women's voices and experiences; in data and archives that hide female business ownership and the gender identities of entrepreneurs; in methodologies and theories whose gendered assumptions are taken for granted; in narratives framed around the economic to the exclusion of the social and the cultural; in disciplinary practices that discourage multidisciplinary collaboration.

These problematics frame their understanding of solutions. Gender and feminist scholars seem to publish in journals other than those that tilt towards business or management. Mills and Williams favour stronger engagement with critical feminist theorists, greater consideration of research from scholars in the sub-fields of cultural, labour, and economic history, and more effective application of multidisciplinary methods, especially post-colonialism, to craft and sustain a more inclusive business history. Even so, the risk remains that those contributions will not be offered to *Business History* and that the debates of contemporary interest and importance appear elsewhere.

Some feminist business scholars might well question how radical the solutions are. We editors paid as much attention to how the authors arrived at their conclusions. Their analysis uncovered clues to barriers at common entry points for feminist interventions. They differentiate efforts to bring gender and feminism to the core. In their hands, gender is an analytical tool capable of illuminating far more than the biases and inequities embedded in business

history. Feminism, as they understand it, involves protest, activism, and collective challenges to patriarchal social orders. They follow Joan Scott in urging consideration of history as 'a package of past politics' that must be challenged for narrowing the diversity and scope of business history. Scholars, they argue, should 'begin anywhere and everywhere'. The opportunities are hiding in plain sight.

This argument is presented in the context of a journal that monitors this issue more closely than many others we know of. Editorial meetings systematically consider authorship demographic data and ask questions of themselves and journal processes. There are areas to celebrate here – for example, women have contributed more to the journal as lead authors over the period 2010–2021, steadily increasing from just over 25% to over 30%. Notwithstanding, we continue to share Mills' and Williams' familiar 'frustrations' about the indifference or neglect of gender and feminism in business history, even if our collective and individual assessments of the field's weaknesses and strengths may differ. The article confirmed both our pessimism and optimism about the future. It certainly upended expectations that our chosen metaphor—from the periphery to the centre—was going to be as straightforward a feminist project as we had hoped.

From this we move to a core discussion area in considering women, gender, feminism, business, and history. The idea that marriage and independent economic activity are incompatible or puzzling is a notion that continues to stick to women (more than men) even today. Almost thirty years of evidence and argument has established the widespread and significant involvement of women in the business of everyday life. Yet the core narratives of business, management and economic history repeat and continually reproduce assumptions about women and marriage that make independent economic activity and agency a problem in search of a solution. The puzzle is how to make sense of centuries of women's business enterprise that signal agency in business, even before 1850, when many women were considered by law and custom to be subordinate to, unequal to, or owned by men.

Amy Erickson frames this puzzle in her study of marriage and wealthy women in eighteenth century London, providing significant new insight into this general historiographical and theoretical puzzle. She drains power from core narratives by rewriting the script, interrogating assumptions with the care and curiosity of a female Victorian super sleuth. She dives into the archives in search of clues about women's capabilities, authority, and agency in marriage and in business, and she finds plenty. Evocative traces have been left, such as billheads (receipts) and a range of primary legal registers/records. But it is the ornately engraved trade card that stands out from the rest. Best described as a highly informative business card, it often contained a map, illustration, and some effectively concise product descriptions. Of the British Museum's online collection of 15,000 cards, Erickson calculates that approximately 40% indicate the sex of those advertising. Of these, approximately 5% are in women's names, and can therefore be associated with high status, high skill, highly capitalised, women-owned and led businesses.

With a piercing eye for detail, Erickson differentiates and distinguishes one card, one woman, and one luxury business from another. She criss-crosses the boundaries of histories of women, labour, and the economy, extracting and reassembling data on business populations and rates of women's labour force participation and entrepreneurship, using details from her sources to build biographies of individual women. Her immaculate exploration of source materials proceeds from one core question: are these traces and sources an accurate representation of reality?

She identifies women like Edith Ridout, a milliner running a highly capitalised export-oriented firm, Anne Askew, and the widow and wax chandler Hannah Jones. From these individual biographies she paints a compelling portrait of a diverse group of single, married, and widowed wealthy eighteenth century women who disrupted social norms and ignored laws that constrained their business activities. These women created and managed specialised and non-specialised businesses, served as apprentices and employed women and men apprentices of their own, with and without family connections. They sold, moved and/or hung on to businesses, sometimes craftily favouring daughters over sons, extending their own tenure even as sons waited in the wings.

The women Erickson writes about have names. They demonstrate economic agency and personal vulnerability in unequal measure. Like some of the men involved in their lives, these wealthy women work in economies because they can, they want to, and they do. The trade cards, she suggests, are themselves a display of agency, compelling scholars to re-imagine what feminism means in a pre-feminist world. In 2015 one of the Editors of this special issue, Mary, used a megaphone linked to her EBH/BHC Presidential Address to declare 'women... change... everything'. Erickson might well agree in spirit, but this editorial team also suspects that she would add a caveat: some women change some things, but they do not do so alone, at the same time, or in the same way with the same results.

Erickson's work therefore confirms yet again what some women economic historians have concluded using different data and information: the eighteenth century was not a golden age for all women. Different women have different lives and experiences in and outside business, just as men do. Class remains an important condition for and against social change and economic mobility. But the taken-for-granted whiteness of the Anglo-American trading world also means that Erickson's wealthy women of eighteenth century London were able to keep one foot in the centre of business history even as they lifted the other over the margins. With trading cards in hand, these women used business as an ally to short-circuit societal notions of separate spheres in-the-making, even as their involvement in trade encouraged a societal re-thinking of women's roles.

Business scholars can no longer claim to understand what goes on in economies without taking note of how cultures and societies disrupt the power dynamics between the margins and the centre. Yet, as is always the case in economies, some businesses do better than others during periods when international trade expands or recedes. It remains to be determined whether those with trading cards, and/or more specialised businesses that traded in specific goods, did better than those without trading cards. The analogy to the modern business card suggests that those businesspeople who exchange cards with others are far more likely to be remembered as network players.

That a single scholar could do so much with so little is humbling. It is one of the many reasons this research is included here.

Media representations of business practice show us a visibly male and masculine world filled with beautiful women and man-made dramas about sex, gender, and feminism. Business history is mostly filled with everything *but*. Amy Grout's paper, 'Le miracle and le mirage', brings sex and beauty right into business history in ways that challenge and complement existing business histories. Although business historians are familiar with the colourful cast of female pioneers who turned the cosmetics industry into a global big business, the beauty institutes that brought their products to markets have escaped detailed scrutiny. Archival holes are wide and deep. Beauty ideals are ever-changing. They are personal-place-and nation-specific.

Grout's analysis of these shops shifts her gaze away from business history's core to the cultural borderlands beyond the periphery, where she locates disciplinary allies in arts and literature. The ghosts of two French celebrities are resurrected: Sidonie-Gabrielle Collette, better known for her sensuous fiction and gender performances than for her entrepreneurial ingenuity, and Louis Leon-Martin, better known as a journalist and novelist (1924) than as a cranky critic of the scientific standardisation of modern beauty practices. Grout stages a virtual faceoff between the two that builds and ends with Collette, a business failure, and Leon's critique, problematic and mostly forgotten.

In between beginning and end, Grout details parallel growth trends in the number and diversity of beauty institutes and the expanding demands for more specialised beauty services from lower- and upper-class women, many of whom had worked in war industries of one kind or another. She cites the 1914–1918 Great War as an important but incomplete part of a more complicated explanation. Guns and trench warfare may have temporarily halted the on-going search for the ideal modern woman, but not for long. Grout detects noticeable differences in how French women saw themselves and were seen by others before and after that war. Before, French women stuck to the self-effacing beauty codes handed down by and shaped by their mothers and grandmothers. Post-war, French society tolerated debate about beauty ideals in the context of growing fears and concerns about national identity, after women had already taken a bite out of the freedom apple associated with work and earnings of their own.

By positioning beauty institutes, owners, and clientele at a critical juncture in French history, when cultural and commercial forces converged to shape debates about the future of the nation, Grout propels debates about beauty from the margins into the centre. She documents processes of specialisation that unfolded as beauty institutes specialised, giving rise to medical clinics and more varied services in dermatology and cosmetic surgery. She shows how the growing market for beauty services brought new and different voices into conversations about beauty ideals, adding those of surgeons and regulators, journalists, and celebrities. Some voices proved easier to listen to than others.

As the narrative moves back and forth from the national to the local, from institutes to clinics, from beauty purveyors to consumers, from the upper to the working classes, from critics to defenders, Grout follows the entwined processes of individual and group self-expression and actualisation. Without losing sight of female entrepreneurial contributions or the sexual power dynamics at play, she shows in wonderful detail how beauty providers and their women clients seized on the power of beauty and fears of national decay to further empower themselves, not only in labour, marriage, and consumer markets, but also in debates about the state of the French union.

The next contribution moves us further into the fantastic. Business history has always been more about reality than fantasy. Bringing gender and feminism back into business has not changed this fact—even in understandings of the beauty industry. But what if the reality was different? What if scholars paid more attention to fantasy? What if they paid more attention to leisure? What if they paid more attention to desire?

This editorial team was not thinking about fantasy or desire when we crafted the call for papers, even though, retrospectively, our efforts could be understood in this way. We had, after all, fantasised about the types of submissions we would receive. Joan Scott asked and addressed this question in *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, her 2011 reflection on the state of women's history and feminism. In much the same way that she weaponized gender in

1986, she thrust fantasy into the social constructionism and history maelstrom. She made clear her intention to utilise psychoanalytical and post-structural theories to address a more general concern: that scholars were stuck in female gender traps of their own making. 'Fantasy', she suggested, 'offers feminist historians a way of thinking about the history of sexuality beyond the narrow confines of identity politics, comparative social movements, and national or transnational sexual cultures' (Scott, 2011).

Swedish scholar Theresa Nordlund Edvinsson finds fantasy galore in 'the games that men play', to cast Scott's ambitious feminist project in a different light. Edvinsson taps the (still) slim vein of scholarship on masculinities and homosociality to make sense of the playfully mocking gender performances of some of Sweden's leading industrialists, the older and younger members of a grouse-hunting society that first appeared in 1890 and lasted until 1960. When adult businessmen strut about as red-crested, black-feathered grouse, fanning their lyre shaped tails, and emitting loud bubbling sounds, the narrative and analytical possibilities are infinite. When not playing such non-human roles, these men converse using discourse riddled with sexual and misogynistic innuendoes and crude sexual jokes; they refer to women in absentia as 'hens' tending nests; they write poems about love and lovers and engage in physical displays of affection.

The wonder is that this group of businessman-hunters saw their homosocial dramas as significant (or insignificant) enough to warrant assembling archives that record their game playing fantasies and hunting passions. The surprise is that it took the hunting and research skills of a female economic historian—and ludologist—to remind us, once again, that 'male is a gender too' (Nelson, 2016).

Edvinsson's choice of homosociality as a framing device, and biography as method, minimises the risk that a radical feminist narrator might suffer the same fate as the poor grouse. The historiographical trail of homosociality is long and winding, beginning in the 1970s, when Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a sociology professor at Harvard Business School, first introduced the terms 'homosocial and homosexual reproduction' to clarify the forces that lead male managers to reproduce their gendered social structure. She argued that the uncertainty of evaluative criteria for managerial selection and promotion, the importance of communication, and the demand for loyalty and devotion among managers, created pressures for social certainty and conformity. She did not interrogate the gender embedded in hierarchical structures as a signal of what it means to be a man, and what that in turn means for gendered discrimination. Michael Roper did. He suggested that homosociality conceals the attraction that provides the intensity of relations between male managers. He shows that homoerotically charged feelings can influence decisions about succession, which in turn, reproduce gender segregation (Roper, 1994, 1996).

Edvinsson further shifts the conversation about gender beyond the margins of business history into the male hunting and gaming frontiers. This combination is unusual in business history, to say the least. Some Swedes have been hunting for centuries. Hunts are customarily stag affairs, dependent upon the availability of game and guns and access to land and forests. Women are notable by their absence. As Callum McKenzie has suggested, hunting has historically masculinised men and 'unfeminized women' (McKenzie, 2005, p. 548). Although there is historiographical interest in fantasy gaming, due in part to the upsurge in fantasy video gaming and associated efforts to address sexism and misogyny in this industry, business scholars have shied away from 'fun and games', as if too much play might detract from

more serious work that educators and businessmen do. Yet businessmen have historically been big fans of games played in the absence of women, especially on the golf course. The Swedish case reverberates over time and space.

Edvinsson grasps both the fun and seriousness of these games. Games have rules, goals and objectives, outcomes, conflict competition, challenge, opposition, interaction, representation, or story (Schrage, 1999). Her subjects have histories, pieced together from biographical details that emerge during her source research. Their names are familiar, they radiate status, standing and authority in the Swedish business community and the wider world. Their gendered dances across a range of masculinities throw off signals about hierarchies of power and status. They play with multiple gender identities, some of which lose their sheen over time, especially when new recruits are invited to join who are positioned differently in Swedish business cultures. The brief appearance and treatment of two women, Sigrun Weslien, the hunting wife of a society member in 1932, and Marianne Wallenberg, a member and wife of banker Marcus Wallenberg, each dramatise in different ways how one sex uses the other to normalise or threaten masculinity.

There has been progress. In the 1970s, *Games that Mother Never Taught You* was first published and advised women to better understand sexual differences if they hoped to succeed as managers (Harragan, 1978). Harragan urged women to accept the gaming reality: understand that you are playing a game according to man-made rules and master those rules. Edvinsson upends the homosocial world of men by showing that homosociality and gender discrimination are two sides of the same code.

Looking forward to more histories

This concludes our short summary of the remarkable contributions collected here. As we have emphasised throughout, we locate our argument about centrality and marginality within and alongside a significant number of other contributions in a range of academic disciplines. Scholars of gender and feminist studies in particular have pioneered radical challenges to the fundamental process of knowledge production. As we conclude, we want to examine three contributions to this discussion in detail, to show potential directions and perhaps more importantly, to reframe them as useful entry points into business history.

First, we consider what researching on or from the margins means epistemologically. Farhana Sultana (2021) writes of the need to recognise how marginality is produced and reproduced, and the significance of that for feminist researchers. Sultana notes the need to name and acknowledge the problematic nature of naming margin and centre as locations for specific points of inquiry. She cites the planetary crisis, global injustice, and continuing colonialism as topics of inquiry that receive less attention than they deserve in part because of their importance to marginalised epistemologies such as feminism and decolonial theory. These approaches, especially feminism, demand a research orientation that is fluid, contextual, everyday, embodied, interrogatory of power, collective, and constructive of alternatives—all challenging to academic disciplines that rely on very different criteria for legitimacy. Sultana's conclusion is key to us here, as she presents 'a request to be continually aware of how marginality is reproduced and how various positionalities within academia are maintained' (161). We believe this is evident in the progression of gender and feminist historical inquiry over the last three to four decades. For as long as gender and feminism are named

or positioned as marginal, the centre—white, western, and constructed around male norms—can retain an unchallenged legitimacy and dominance in the hierarchy of knowledge claims.

Second, we consider the productive possibilities of marginal research practice. Az Causevic and colleagues tell us how research looks and feels in their discipline, international relations, in terms of centrality and marginality. Their focus has been on centering knowledge from the margins, writing from the margins, as scholar-activists. Interestingly for readers of this journal, their research has involved reading against the grain of colonial sources and the politics of the archive itself:

I believe in the transformative power of archives ... But that process is not a simple, transparent one; we need so many kinds of archive labor, from curation, preservation, and access to historiographic and theoretical frames for reading archives. I cut my teeth on colonial archives. I learnt early to “read against the grain,” scouring the colonial archives for traces of Indigenous resistance, reading scientific reports for traces of silenced voices. Now I am relishing the treasure trove of formerly overlooked archives, brought to us by a combination of digital affordances and librarians’ painstaking labors. I have been able to find more accounts of “alternative” lives and politics with the aid of digital technologies and dedicated, progressive archivists than I ever could have imagined when I was reading colonial archives under the watchful, warning gaze of their post-colonial governmental custodians. (Causevic et al., 2020, p. 16)

Finally, we can consider the possibility that Charlotte Witt raises, in her argument that feminist writing flourishes precisely *because* it is on the margins, a creative location (Witt, 1996). As (what Witt calls) disciplinary misfits, feminists can write across paradigms, speaking to multiple debates. Witt also notes very clearly, however, that marginality can be a career limiting position, and that readers can find it difficult to categorise feminist ideas, especially in relation to more established (‘central’) debates. This may, according to Witt, be intrinsic to feminist theory, as it responds to something unsatisfactory, and is therefore constituted through it.

Familiarity with this argument is essential to the development of gender and feminist scholarship in this journal and in business history. Feminism, and feminists, are all too easily dismissed as cranky, awkward, grumpy, and grumbly. Rather than provoking thought and reflection, new ideas and interesting possibilities, or hope for positive change, our experience suggests that feminism and feminists are positioned as causing trouble, asking irrelevant questions, or destroying disciplinary norms. (This is also true for those of us who wish to talk and write about racist oppression, and therefore doubly difficult for those conducting intersectional analysis.) Sara Ahmed challenges all of this in her thinking and activism; her refusal to ‘bracket’ racism and sexism in a ‘more loving digestion of the philosophical canon’ (2017, p. 9) means that the marginal creatively shapes the centre. Ownership of any difficulties experienced is transferred to those constructing and maintaining the core of the discipline or debate.

To put this even more bluntly: if the papers in this special issue, and the proposal put forward here, provoke discomfort, perhaps even discomfort enough to rethink your professional practice from archive to publishing, then we have succeeded, and look forward to how historical research and education happen differently in the future. If marginality can encourage creativity, and creativity can provoke change, then gender and feminist scholars will be making the difference needed, for themselves and their research, and for all involved in writing history.

As part of our aim to discomfort, we also include an extended epilogue, drawing on the expertise of Jennifer Aston, Hannah Barker, Gabrielle Durepos, Shenette Garrett-Scott, Peter James Hudson, and Angel Kwolek-Folland, to suggest how this conversation of what is central and what is marginal might continue through extended questioning and dialogue. The invited thoughts of these six scholars not only confirm business history as a field of shifting centres and margins, with meanings that vary; they underscore the need for all scholars to keep asking what they get wrong and right about business, gender, and feminism, and why this matters, now more than ever. Together with this introduction, and the challenge represented by the four papers, we believe this Special Issue represents an important and pointed challenge to the largely de-racialised and de-gendered centre of the business history field.

Coda: academic work during a global pandemic

Paper authors submitted their manuscripts to our call just as the first people began to fall ill with Covid-19. The entire review and publication process has unfolded during the difficult working conditions we have all experienced (the difficulties have been differential and unevenly distributed around the world, but it is still reasonable to observe that we have all experienced considerable work and life challenges). Even if those working conditions have been less difficult than for many other professions or workplaces, they have still been exceptionally testing, and of course life experiences have been very different to those expected too. For these reasons, we are more than usually grateful to everyone involved in producing this special issue, especially our guiding editor-in-chief Stephanie Decker, and the anonymous reviewers who generously donated their expertise, skill, and care in working with us all to bring the initial submissions to the best place possible for the journal's readership. We have read a series of claims recently that the peer review system is either unsustainable (Lund Dean & Forray, 2018) or hopelessly anomalous in its asymmetrical power relations (Willmott, 2022); our experience has been quite different on both counts. The authorship and peer review that results in these papers have been care-full, generous, thoughtful, patient, and constructive, on both sides. Perhaps we were lucky; perhaps the paper subjects and approaches encouraged this (it was in many ways a feminist process); or perhaps this corner of the academic profession still believes in and practises peer review as it should/can be. Whatever the explanation, we are grateful and, on this basis, feel optimistic about the future development of this area of business history.

Note

1. Keeping with the metaphor of American Football, we allude here to the Superbowl television coverage of 2022, and its halftime show that celebrated black music culture, as well as protest. The show was 'a flash of radicalism and a jolt of elegance, a pushback and an embrace, an implicit raised fist and a wink' (New York Times, Feb 13, 2022), which is perhaps how conversations around exclusion within an academic arena should also start.

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Notes on contributors

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