«Not a mere tangential outbreak»: gender, feminism and cultural heritage

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to provide an overview of recent contributions to the "gender and heritage" debate, focusing in particular on suggestions and recommendations about how to expand and further advance the gender agenda in the heritage field of research. The first section considers the arguments put forward in a series of articles that evaluate the level of knowledge and development achieved in the heritage field, exposing shortcomings and impediments. The second section takes a closer look at the dialogue between feminist theory and museum studies, arguing that feminist interventions in the museum sector, which

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have a long history dating back to the 1970s, are predicated on a fruitful intermingling of theoretical insights and practical strategies. The final part offers a synthesis of gender-aware proposals and methodological models elaborated, and in some cases tested, in the literature under review.

Lo scopo di questo articolo è quello di offrire una rassegna critica di contributi recenti al dibattito su *gender* e patrimonio culturale, con particolare attenzione rivolta alle proposte e raccomandazioni su come affermare istanze di genere in questo campo di ricerca. La prima parte si concentra sulle argomentazioni avanzate in una serie di articoli che valutano lo stato dell'arte, evidenziando ostacoli e mancanze. La seconda sezione prende in considerazione più specificatamente il dialogo tra teorie femministe e museologia, sottolineando come questo dialogo, che va avanti da tempo, sia strutturato su un produttivo inter-scambio tra input teorici e strategie operative. La sezione finale contiene una sintesi delle proposte avanzate nella letteratura presa in esame.

> But, after all, we are of much greater significance when we see ourselves as a part of a whole bigger than ourselves. So to find that what women are doing today is not queer, not erratic, not a mere tangential outbreak; that it is not even new; that it is part of a consecutive movement as old as the ages, is well worth while.
> Alice Ames Winter, *The Heritage of Women*, 1927

1. *Introduction*

2018 has been designated as the European Year of Cultural Heritage. To celebrate the richness and diversity of cultural heritage in Europe, over 7.000 events in 28 countries are in store, ranging from festivals, fairs and conferences, to art-labs, award ceremonies and theatrical performances[1]. How many of these events will be focused on women's history and heritage, or address gender dynamics? At the time of writing (March 2018), the EYCH website highlights only one activity that falls under this category: the UK-based "Extraordinary Women" initiative[2]. While it is to be hoped that more events exploring the gendered nature of heritage will be flagged on the website, one wonders to what extent the present lacuna is symptomatic of a broader lack of attention to gender issues in the field of cultural heritage.

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[1] See <https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/eych-events-grid_en>, 28.05.2018.
[2] See <https://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/news-desk/news/extraordinary-women>, 20.05.2018.

Such a field, of course, is too vast, multifarious and stratified to be considered as a single entity. This paper focuses mainly on the ongoing academic debate about gender in heritage studies. An apparent irony is noticeable in this debate: nearly all contributors lament the fact that in heritage discourse gender appears irrelevant or at best marginal, while also charting various initiatives that go against the grain of such indifference[3]. Over the last ten years, the field of heritage studies has grown considerably. It is now a vast and expanding research area, attracting a variety of disciplines in its orbit, as testified by the numerous companions, published in recent years, that take stock of the state of the art and anticipate possible future developments[4]. That most of these publications contain chapters devoted to "gender and heritage" suggests an increasing level of attention, though sustained investigations into the gender dynamics at work in the management, preservation, interpretation and transmission of heritage are still relatively rare.

This paper offers an overview of recent contributions to the "gender and heritage" debate, focusing in particular on suggestions and recommendations about how to expand and further advance the gender agenda in the heritage field of research. The first section considers the arguments put forward in a series of articles that evaluate the level of knowledge and development achieved in the heritage field, exposing shortcomings and impediments[5]. The second section takes a closer look at the dialogue between feminist theory and museum studies, arguing that feminist interventions in the museum sector, which have a long history dating back to the 1970s, are predicated on a fruitful intermingling of theoretical insights and practical strategies. The final part offers a synthesis of gender-aware proposals and methodological models elaborated, and in some cases tested, in the literature under review.

2. *Gender and Heritage*

There is no doubt that heritage is gendered. As Laurajane Smith rightly observes: «it is gendered in the way heritage is defined, understood and talked about, and, in turn, in the way it reproduces and legitimizes gender identities and the social values that underpin them»[6]. However, this dimension has only recently begun to receive the attention of scholars and professionals. Drawing

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[3] Smith 2008; Shortliffe 2015; Levy 2013; Wilson 2018.

[4] See, for instance, Waterton, Watson 2015; Graham, Howard 2008; Bourdeau, Gravari-Barbas, Robinson 2015; Logan, Craith, Kockel 2016.

[5] The articles discussed in this section fall into the category of "scholarship on the scholarship", providing across-the-board assessments of a variety of contributions, and thus can be considered authoritative evaluations of current trends in research.

[6] Smith 2008, p. 161.

on the notion of «Authorized Heritage Discourse» (AHD)[7], Smith argues that a masculine perspective, informed by class-specific values and perceptions, has tended to dominate the way in which heritage has been preserved, valued and interpreted. This bias has contributed to validating an elite view of male history – the history of great men and their deeds – perpetuated through the artful selection of sites, monuments, artefacts and places that come to count as "heritage" to the extent that they confirm that view.

Exposing the masculinity of heritage and debunking the myth of its gender neutrality is only the first step in a more complex process of awareness raising. The questions Smith poses have been high on the agenda of feminist historians, philosophers and theorists for many decades. It is not only cultural heritage that suffers from an unacknowledged masculine bias camouflaged as neutrality. Even a cursory look at the rich legacy of feminist historiography and criticism[8] will reveal that the process whereby traditions (historical, artistic, literary) are "canonized" has been legitimized on the basis of allegedly universal values that elect the masculine as the «consecrated somatic norm»[9]. In Smith's diagnosis of her own field of research, the absence or paucity of women's sites («places of significance to women's history and experience»)[10] in registers of preserved heritage, coupled with workplace cultures dominated by masculine practices and values, contribute to perpetuating gender inequality in conservation practices.

How to change this structural bias? One approach, defined as remedial, consists in adding women's perspectives and experiences to the tapestry of heritage. This may sound like a timid form of intervention, unlikely to produce radical results. Yet, as feminist historiography demonstrates, the act of "adding" also entails questioning and contesting the parameters according to which inclusions and exclusions are justified[11]. Smith acknowledges that some programmes are already in place to help identify and preserve women's sites[12]; networks have been established (especially in the museum sector) to support gender initiatives in the heritage field; and gender equity guidelines now exist

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[7] In Smith's definition, AHD is a professional discourse which has long dominated Western debates about the value, nature and meaning of heritage. It originated in nineteenth-century discussions about conservation *versus* restoration and still reflects upper- and middle-class biases and values: «It is as much a discourse of nationalism and patriotism as it is of certain class experiences and social and aesthetic value» (Smith 2006, p. 28).

[8] The bibliography on this score is too vast to be summed up in the short space of a footnote; it is best to refer to companions and handbooks which usefully illustrate research developments, see, for example, Rooney 2006; Meade, Weisner-Hanks 2008; Disch, Hawkesworth 2016; Spongberg, Curthoys, Caine 2005.

[9] Puwar 2004, p. 3.

[10] Smith 2008, p. 162.

[11] The "add women and stir" approach has been criticised for its failure to challenge underlying structures of domination (Harding 1993). However, insofar as the systematic omission of women's contribution to cultural heritage is still quite pervasive, "adding" continues to serve an important purpose, as some of the scholars, whose work I discuss in the next section, claim.

[12] Smith 2008, p. 164.

for museums, galleries and government agencies, which may facilitate much-needed innovations in the workplace. Yet, Smith is cautious in assessing the impact of these early-stage interventions: «the inclusion of gender issues into mainstream heritage debates and practices is not an easy or short-term process», she concludes, underscoring the tendency to confine women's exhibitions or gendered interpretations of history «to special, temporary or token events»[13].

A second approach Smith singles out as more promising, in terms of its potential impact on the gendering of heritage, revolves around a notion of heritage understood as a «social and cultural performance, in which cultural and social values and meanings are recognized and negotiated, and then either accepted, rejected and/or contested»[14]. Heritage sites, in other words, can be viewed metaphorically as theatres where «performances of identity, remembering and commemoration are played out»[15]. Rather than assuming the passivity of visitors, male and female, this approach emphasises the performative dimension of interacting with and experiencing heritage sites. How gender comes into the equation is then elucidated by referring to a project Smith carried out in 2004, based on interviews with visitors of labour museums and country houses in England. The snippets of interviews, quoted in the article, reveal that visitors actively engaged with the histories narrated through exhibitions, relating them to their personal family stories and using the visit also to reflect on «their own sense of gendered self»[16]. These reflections, however, as Smith duly notices, rarely instigated radical or unexpected interpretations; most often «socially conservative and deferential»[17] messages were conveyed that tended to reaffirm gender stereotypes.

While the notion of "performance" seems to imply that roles and identities can be assumed or discarded at will, and that visiting a heritage site could be conceived as a quasi-theatrical experience, the experiment Smith conducted suggests, instead, that the performance of identity is not a free play. Judith Butler's theory of gender as «a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo»[18] is of relevance here. If gender is to be understood as a «performative act», it is an act of rehearsal that occurs «within the confines of already existing directives»[19]. Less playful or parodic than constrained, the performance of gender can hardly be construed as a free play in which the individual takes on or takes off the «artifice» of gender at will[20]. What Smith's analyses underline, however, is the interconnection between the active

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[13] Ivi, p. 166.
[14] Ivi, p. 167.
[15] *Ibidem.*
[16] Ivi, p. 171.
[17] *Ibidem.*
[18] Butler 1988, p. 520.
[19] Ivi, p. 526.
[20] Butler 1993, p. IX.

engagement of heritage users and the making visible of what would otherwise remain unexplored; namely the gender dimension. Put differently, it is only when visitors are solicited to take an active role, that heritage sites can become stages where it is possible to explore, in a variety of ways, the performance of gender, relating the past to the present, and the personal to the collective. As Smith concludes: «much further research into visitors interactions with heritage places is not only needed, but is likely to produce rich and instructive results»[21].

In *Gender, Feminism and Heritage* (2013), Janet E. Levy emphasises another recurrent preoccupation, briefly touched upon by Smith as well[22], which concerns the relative weight of gender and diversity issues: «debate about the role and impact of indigenous and other minority communities on the future of heritage management and heritage interpretations is well developed», Levy writes, «yet there is relatively little mention of the appropriate attention to women and issues of gender»[23]. Whether the best way to overcome this elision is to campaign for separate institutions (like the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Wahsington, D.C.)[24] or to operate within mainstream institutions to change their strategies and politics of representation is a moot point. In the remainder of her article, however, Levy seems more inclined to support the latter option. With a distinct focus on heritage management and interpretation, her appraisal of current practices singles out the use of falsely genderless language as a major hurdle. The way towards inclusion and recognition entails being «explicitly reflective about [gender], rather than trying to be as "neutral" as possible"[25].

Feminist scholars have long objected to gender-blind language. In their much-quoted examination of UNESCO'S *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and the *Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity* (2001), Moghadam and Bagheritari specifically opine that «the Declaration makes no mention of women's rights, participation or equality, or to gendered understandings of 'lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs'»[26]. This omission has important repercussions for the tension between cultural rights and women's rights: so long as the former are presented in a gender-blind fashion, «the challenges faced by diverse groups of

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[21] Smith 2008, p. 172.
[22] Ivi, p. 165.
[23] Levy 2013, p. 87.
[24] Devoted exclusively to championing women's achievements in the arts, the NMWA actively promotes cultural policies that address the gender imbalance in the presentaiton of art. Its mission statement reads: «The National Museum of Women in the Arts brings recognition to the achievements of women artists of all periods and nationalities by exhibiting, preserving, acquiring, and researching art by women and by teaching the public about their accomplishments». See <https://nmwa.org/about> 25.05.2018.
[25] *Ibidem.*
[26] Moghadam, Bagheritari 2007, p. 15.

women within their own cultural group»[27] will continue to go undetected. It would be disingenuous to deny that UNESCO has already taken commendable steps to integrate gender-sensitive approaches: the 2014 report *Gender Equality Heritage and Creativity* is a telling case in point. However, as the authors of this report point out in the final Recommendations, more «interdisciplinary research on gender equality in heritage and the creative industries»[28] is necessary, alongside more targeted actions, at the national and international level, to support gender-responsive policies and strategies in culture[29].

UNESCO's commitment to gender mainstreaming and women's rights comes under critical scrutiny in Shortliffe's contribution to the volume *World Heritage, Tourism and Identity* (2015), in which she exposes the unacknowledged gender bias that subtends the selection of sites for inclusion on the *World Heritage List*. «There exists a serious lacuna in terms of understanding the role that gender plays in the heritage field»[30], claims Shortliffe, a lacuna that appears all the more glaring when compared to advancements in the development sector, which is «far ahead of the heritage sector in terms of gender awareness»[31]. Drawing on Sophia Labaldi's examination of nomination dossiers, Shortliffe argues that the sites being proposed for inclusion «were most often associated with historical men or successful male entrepreneurs, especially in the case of industrial heritage»[32]. Neglecting women's achievements and stories not only reflects a one-sided view of history, but it also corroborates a limited, stereotypical version of masculinity linked to orthodox ideas of heroism and success.

Like Smith and Levy, Shortliffe too poses the question of gender issues in relation to the diversity agenda, arguing that UNESCO and its advisory bodies (ICOMOS, IUCN and ICCROM) are more inclined to recognise the rights and value of minority and indigenous cultures than they are to incorporate explicit mentions of gender and women's issues in discussions on diversity. What could explain this imbalance are the different power dynamics prevailing in the relationship between "minority" and "majority" cultures, on the one hand, and gender relations, on the other. In Shortliffe's words:

[27] Ivi, p. 16.
[28] UNESCO 2014, p. 135.
[29] It is also worth mentioning that the gender diagnosis of heritage and creativity in this report is rather bleak: women's participation in decision-making is limited, they are segregated into certain types of activities, enjoy few opportunities for training, capacity-building and networking, and have to bear the unequal burden of unpaid care work, while «gender stereotypes and fixed ideas about culturally appropriate role for women and men» still determine their sphere of influence (UNESCO 2014, p. 134). The February 2016 issue of «World Heritage» is devoted to the theme *World Heritage and Gender*, confirming UNESCO's commitment to exploring further the gender dimension of world heritage.
[30] Shortliffe 2015, p. 108.
[31] Ivi, p. 110.
[32] *Ibidem*.

With changes to gender relations and the empowerment of women there can be no distance placed between "them" and "us" because the relationships are symbiotic. There can be no "man" without "woman" and vice versa because the roles and values ascribed to each gender are dependent on those ascribed to the other. It is therefore much easier to discuss minority and indigenous rights because it does not automatically imply change or shifts in power for the dominant group[33].

While this assessment may sound a tad simplistic, it is meant to highlight the specific difficulties encountered in the attempt to tackle the stubborn gender blindness of institutions, organisations, communities and individuals – a blindness contingent upon entrenched power structures within both dominant and non-dominant cultures. The point is not to advance the gender agenda in opposition to, or in competition with, the diversity agenda. Rather, the point both Smith and Shortliffe are making is that promoting cultural diversity in a gender-neutral manner further obscures the complex gender dynamics at play within cultures and their interrelations with societies.

The role of research is crucial in identifying new sites, providing information about them and interpreting their meaning. In this field, Shortliffe claims, the criterion of scientific objectivity has often led to gender blindness. Changes in research practices are therefore necessary: «There must be a move away from accepting research as something which is apolitical and gender neutral. Every decision the researcher makes inform the version of facts and stories which will be presented and told»[34]. More specifically, Shortliffe suggests that an *ad hoc* framework of gender analysis, suitable for heritage sites should be devised, much in the line of what the development sector has already achieved[35]. Such a type of analysis would facilitate the «mainstreaming of gender into heritage and tourism management, and the interpretation and representation of sites, for heritage professionals and sites managers»[36]. It is to be regretted that no further hints are provided, in Shortliffe's article, about the outline of such a framework. One can only hope that it will be formulated not just in dialogue with development professionals and researchers, but also by drawing on the gender expertise accumulated, over many decades, in several disciplinary fields, within the humanities and social sciences remit, which have led the way in terms of radically changing methods and paradigms through the adoption of a gender lens[37].

Indeed, Anna Reading's examination of feminist approaches to heritage and heritage studies points in this direction. By casting a wider net, looking at the history of single disciplines that converge in the multidisciplinary heritage

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[33] Ivi, p. 112.

[34] Ivi, p. 113

[35] The most famous models are the Moser gender analysis framework (Moser 1993) and the Harvard analytical framework (March, Smyth, Mukhopadhyay 1999).

[36] Shortliffe 2015, p. 117.

[37] Most of these achievements are illustrated in Disch, Hawkesworth 2016.

studies field, Reading is able to formulate a more hopeful evaluation of the critical dialogue between gender, feminism and heritage studies: «Gendered perspectives on heritage actually have a longer history within discipline-specific work derived from archaeology, history, town planning, anthropology, and Aboriginal and Indigenous studies, as well as geography, environmental studies, art history and museum studies»[38]. Reading mentions the archaeological work of Sarah Belzoni (1783-1870), active in the 1820s, Margaret Mead's more widely known anthropological studies, and Marina Warner's memorable investigation into the gender of monuments and heritage buildings[39]. Other names could be added to the list: Octavia Hill (1838-1912), for example, one of the founders of the National Trust in England, who campaigned effectively to protect natural heritage[40]; Anna Pamela Cunningham (1816-1875), who was a pioneer in the historic preservation movement in nineteenth-century America at a time when all-male antiquarian societies dominated the scene[41]; and more recently Caroline Criado Perez, whose relentless campaign to increase representations of women in public places has led to the commissioning of a statue commemorating the achievements of the suffragist Millicent Fawcett, the first statue of a woman to be raised in Parliament Square (London)[42].

Of course, for these examples not to remain mere tokens, more systematic examinations of all the components of the gendered landscape of heritage are necessary. Anna Reading identifies four main areas of enquiry – representation; consumption; curation and management; and heritage policies and protocols – where some progress has been made in terms of foregrounding gender issues[43]. For example, as Smith also noted, much valuable work has been done on gendered representations in museums, galleries, heritage sites and cultural practices. In this area, Reading detects a significant shift towards a broader and more incisive deployment of gender as an analytical tool to address power relations and the construction of both masculinities and femininities within museum environments or in relation to public monuments. Likewise, on the side of consumption, questions pertaining to visitors' encounters with cultural heritage and heritage sites are being reformulated to include the gender dimension. Do men and women relate to exhibits differently? How does the «gendered performance of guides»[44] affect their perceptions? More to the point, how are processes of digitalisation and the development of digital cultures changing the ways in which public sites are accessed and experienced?

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[38] Reading 2015, p. 400.
[39] Warner 1985.
[40] Hill 1877.
[41] Baldwin, Ackerson 2017.
[42] Criado Perez 2017.
[43] Reading 2015, p. 398.
[44] Ivi, p. 403.

The large-scale digitization of heritage, Reading remarks, has important implications «for how we conceive of feminist methods»[45]. With the widening of participation that digitisation and connective technologies allow, novel types of activism – «new forms of guerrilla memorywork»[46] – can be devised that will help support feminist heritage work. Reading's 2016 book on gender, memory and «globital» technology is one good example of innovative work that critically engages with digital communication and media technologies[47]. «How memory is now gendered through, by and with digital technologies», Reading observes in the first chapter, «is critical to the way in which humanity can generate a more equal future for men and women»[48]. Her book seeks to devise innovative ways to explore how gendered memories travel across time and space, focusing on mobile and social technologies in three ambits: the home, the body and public space.

In the observations and critiques illustrated so far, two main concerns emerge: the use of a falsely genderless language (in documents, conventions, museum interpretations), and the marginalisation of gender issues in heritage discourse, even as dissident voices are clearly making themselves heard. The myth of a gender-neutral heritage, which all contributors critique, is also perpetuated through linguistic and rhetorical practices that fail to acknowledge, in words, texts and discourses, the existence of deep-rooted gender asymmetries and inequalities. Under the pretence of universality or neutrality, authorized heritage discourse has been complicit with gender ideologies that assign a secondary role to women, or marginalise their history. As Levy concludes, «[b]ecause women and men (and possibly members of other genders) almost certainly participated in every human experience memorialized by a heritage project, *an explicit recognition of gender is appropriate in all heritage situations*»[49].

This proposal is deceptively simple. Recognition of gender in any heritage project is contingent on several factors: the cultural sensitivity of individuals and organisations; the training of professionals; the availability of resources; and the distribution of power within a given institution, to name only a few variables. Yet pursuing this strategy would allow the heritage sector to align itself more squarely with global commitments to gender mainstreaming and gender equity. One operative suggestion that moves in this direction is Shortliffe's idea of a specific framework of gender analysis for the heritage sector, which

[45] Ivi, p. 409.

[46] Ivi, p. 408.

[47] The neologism «globital memory», as Reading explains, «is used to denote the way in which memory in the 21st century or the Globital Age has and is being transformed by the synergetic forces of digitisation and globalisation to produce an ecology of immersive connective memory on the move» (Reading 2016, p. 46)

[48] Ivi, p. 10. A similar point is raised by Withers 2015: «Instead of feeling overwhelmed by greater access to archival forms within the digitized historical condition […] perhaps we can understand the *increased contact* with different historical time as a point of emergence» (p. 113).

[49] Levy 2013, p. 90. Emphasis added.

would provide tools and methods to ensure that gender-neutral representations, interpretations and curating practices are eschewed in favour of more gender-balanced approaches. The controversies surrounding World Heritage sites that exclude women, such as Mount Athos in Greece, as well as human rights issues in relation to intangible cultural heritage[50] provide further evidence that such a framework is needed.

Not all scholars agree that greater mainstreaming of gender-aware research should be pursued. In his introduction to a recent collection of essays entitled *Gender and Heritage: Performance, Place, and Politics* (2018), Ross J. Wilson provocatively champions a form of strategic liminality for heritage gender studies:

Where the place of gender studies at the edges of research has often been the cause of lament and criticism from scholars working in this field, it is the locus were a 'critical gender heritage studies' can emerge. Rather than seeking to place gender in the mainstream of academic research, it is from the periphery where an engaged and analytical study of gender and heritage can most benefit scholarship and wider society[51].

Identifying mainstream research with canonical orthodoxy and the «tyranny of the normal», Wilson forcefully reclaims the significance of "exteriority" or liminality for a genuinely critical mode of enquiry. It is from the edges, from the neglected periphery that symbolic resistance to hegemonic structures and challenges to established norms are often formulated. Wilson mobilises this rationale to advocate an even more fundamental role of gender studies as the «primary point of critique for modern society»[52]. For this critique to remain effective and vigilant, the position of marginality must be strategically embraced rather than contested: while gender defines and structures the life experiences of men and women, and is not, in this respect, marginal, the liminality advanced in this article pertains to the location in which scholarship would be best placed to pursue a critical agenda.

While it is laudable to place such trust in the transformative power of a critique from the edges, one could also argue that self-appointed liminality is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it facilitates the adoption of a critical perspective, non-complicit with dominant, orthodox paradigms; on the other hand, it runs the risk of driving gender further away from the concerns of the "core", without disturbing the central equilibria of AHD. The "core"/"periphery" binary deceptively suggests that these are two discrete entities, while it is their interrelation that matters the most. In the heritage field, theory and praxis are perhaps more intertwined than in other scholarly areas of

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[50] Blake 2015 and 2016.
[51] Wilson 2018, p. 6.
[52] Ivi, p. 9.

research[53]: transforming sophisticated critical insights into operative suggestions and recommendations is fundamental to effect change. By favouring a stance of undiluted exteriority, the kind of critical gender heritage studies Wilson is proposing leans heavily on the side of theory and critique, while suspending the equally relevant task of "invading" the space of core knowledge and practices, to use Doreen Messay's and Puwar's metaphor[54]. To a large extent, gender studies scholars already exist on the inside of the heritage field, though they may not perceive their position as that of "natural" occupants of such a space. In order to change or expand what feels "natural", voluntarily decamping to the margins may sound like a self-defeating option.

However, it is noteworthy that while the book opens with a vindication of strategic marginality, it ends with a chapter by Wera Grahn which tackles head-on much needed changes in museum practices, offering an operational model for assessing the integration of gender issues and awareness of gender perspectives in heritage institutions[55]. Other contributors too straddle the spheres of theory and praxis, aiming to show where change is happening and how to learn from best practices[56]. Most authors seem to understand strategic liminality *at work* as a renewed form of commitment not only to interdisciplinary research, but also to questioning established paradigms and practices, with an eye for operable interventions, as the next section will show. Ultimately, what matters most is not to opt theoretically either for mainstreaming or for deliberate marginality, but to open up a space (however defined) for new proposals to emerge that can effectively contribute to modifying how the past is narrated «at both a structural and practically concrete level»[57].

3. *Feminism and Museums*

Feminist perspectives have been making fresh inroads in the field of museology and curatorship for quite some time now. An offshoot of cultural studies, the research area now best known as museum studies has been engaged, since the late 1980s, in a self-reflexive process of critical rethinking, deeply influenced by post-colonial and post-structuralist scholarship and, more recently, by object-

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[53] As Conlan and Levin explain referring to museum studies: «with one foot in the gallery and one in the academy, the excitement of this area of cultural studies is that practical applications are always close to mind. Scholars and museum workers experiment with translating theory into praxis, recording their successes and failures» (Conlan, Levin 2019, p. 299).
[54] Puwar 2004; Massey 1996.
[55] Grahn 2018.
[56] See, for instance, Ebeling 2018 and Lariat 2018.
[57] Grahn 2018, p. 265.

oriented ontologies and post-humanist frameworks[58]. Although the publications that came to define this critical shift did not specifically address gender issues[59], discussions about feminism, sexuality and gender in relation to museum practices are not lacking. Feminist forays into the world of art, museums and galleries have a long history. As Levin reminds us, the late nineteenth-century suffragist movement targeted works of art for their stereotypical representation of women[60]. In the late 1960s and 1970s, feminist scholars and activists were deeply committed to denouncing the patriarchal bias of art history, canonical literature, and curatorial practices in museums. The first networks of women artists and critics – for example: WAR (Women Artist in Revolution) or WSABAL (Women, Students, and Artists for Black Art Liberation) – were established in the 1970s, and new ones were formed in the 1980s (the Guerrilla Girls, the Women's Art Coalition). In other words, attending to the politics of representation in the art world and exposing sexist assumptions and behaviours were an integral part of feminist politics broadly understood.

This rich legacy of contestation still resonates in current debates. Feminism, of course, is not a monolithic entity or a single doctrine: it should rather be conceptualised as an assemblage of various *prises de position*, theories and themes changing over time, while retaining a fundamental commitment to equality[61]. The feminist epistemologies invoked in the critical literature on museums range from Susan Harding's standpoint theory to Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional approach, to Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminism and Karen Barad's agential realism[62]. The increasing relevance of theory to feminist museology is hard to miss[63]. This section will concentrate on a selection of contributions that discuss specifically how mobilising feminist epistemologies can inspire transformative practices.

Are women underrepresented in heritage institutions and the art world? This question, which spurred the pioneering work of art historians and curators in the 1970s[64], has been considered problematic by subsequent generations of feminist scholars who have argued that simply «looking for opportunities to "add" women and the feminine to museums and museum practices»[65] falls short

[58] Harrison 2013 and 2015.
[59] See Vergo 1989; Karp, Lavine 1991; Sherman, Rogoff 1994.
[60] Levin 2010b, p. 2.
[61] As Rosemarie Tong writes, «feminist thought is old enough to have a history complete with a set of labels: liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist, psychoanalytic, care-focused, existentialist, postmodern, women of color, global, postcolonial, transnational, and ecofeminist. To be sure, this list of labels is incomplete and highly contestable. Indeed, it probably does not capture the full range of feminism's intellectual and political commitments to women. Yet, feminist thought's traditional labels still remain serviceable. They signal to the public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology and that all feminists do not think alike» (Tong 2014, p. 1).
[62] Harding 1993, Crensshaw 1989; Braidotti 2013; Barad 2007.
[63] Grahn, Wilson 2010; Levin 2010a; Bergsdóttir 2016.
[64] See for example the article by Linda Nochlin 1988, a "classic" of feminist art history.
[65] Porter 1995, p. 116.

of achieving radical results. Yet, as Maura Reilly points out in a recent article, «counting is, after all, a feminist strategy»[66]. In her quantitative analyses, Reilly compares percentages of male and female artists in solo exhibitions in the US, the UK, France and Germany, over a seven-year period (2007-2014), and takes a closer look at art-market statistics. Her findings are a powerful reminder of the persistence of inequality and sexism in this sector:

The more closely one examines art-world statistics, the more glaringly obvious it becomes that, despite decades of post-colonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the majority continue to be defined as white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged, and, above all, male. Sexism is still so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected[67].

While recognising that the position of women artists has improved over the past four decades, Reilly provides numbers and statistics, facts and figures, which tell a story of persistent gender disparity noticeable in permanent collections, gallery representations, solo exhibition programmes, auction-price differentials and press coverage. In the light of these findings, the quest for equal representation can hardly be regarded as *passé*. The «fixes» Reilly lists in her conclusion could be summed up by the expression "making trouble". Her broad-based call to action includes holding curators and museum Boards accountable, calling institutions out for sexist practices, drawing on the legacy of feminist historiography and curatorship, and participating in feminist coalitions and networks active in the art world -- in other word, an energetic commitment to probing and questioning, at various levels, exclusionary standards of normality.

If making visible «the presence of women's absence»[68] can still be regarded as a useful strategy, some scholars opine that its impact is limited[69]. Angela Dimitrakaki, for instance, is sceptical of feminist approaches solely preoccupied with facilitating women artists' institutional access: «discussions concerning feminist curating are still stuck on the production and display of feminist or women's art, underplaying the need for a more theoretical analysis focused on the political, social and economic implications of the curatorial act as a feminist intervention»[70]. High on Dimitrakaki's agenda is what she terms «feminist institutional critique»[71], a form of politically inflected curatorship, fully aware of the conditions of globalization which affect the modernisation of art institutions, and «claiming a central role in the provision of curatorial commons»[72]. The act of curating politically as a feminist would entail not

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[66] Reilly 2015.
[67] Ivi.
[68] Bergsdóttir, Hafsteinsson 2018, p. 110.
[69] Porter 1998; Levin 2010b; Hein 2010; Wilson 2018.
[70] Dimitrakaki 2013, p. 26.
[71] Ivi, p. 28.
[72] Ivi, p. 34.

only that oppressive power structures become exposed and contested, but also that feminist knowledges, through the labour of curating, «are freely used by diverse constituencies, becoming 'common knowledge' in a different sense»[73]. By her own admission, this possibility is an ideal rather than a reality – an anti-separatist ideal mobilised in antithesis to feminist specialism.

The search for radical rather than reformist answers to the perennial question "what is to be done?" is shared by many scholars who, like Dimitrakaki, posit feminist theories as a powerful instrument for a broader critique of intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression that cannot be tackled on the basis of «additive» and «fractional» politics of inclusion[74]. In the words of Hilde Hein, «feminism makes common cause with various minority, postcolonial, racialized, gendered and multicultural analyses»[75]. Looking at museums from a feminist perspective, therefore, implies an expanded awareness of the complex intersectional dynamics at work in the co-construction of identities: «Identities are not created out of one single social category, but are formed at the crossroad of several intersecting power structures»[76]. Considering these premises, what would an applied intersectional approach to museums require? For Robert, it requires first and foremost «reflecting critically on the structures and systems that museum professionals rely upon to shape their work»[77]. These structures include, for example, how museums envisage time and temporality in the chronological narratives of exhibitions, how standards of success are defined, and institutional authority is conceived. In all these areas, Robert argues, «assumptions of racial and gender superiority»[78] are often uncritically reproduced, leading to gaps, exclusions and mis-representations. The one strategy that Robert's intersectional approach strongly recommends is for museum professionals «to become conscious» of these and other assumptions, for only a heightened awareness of foundational ideologies and misconceptions can enable museums to make «sustainable changes that truly create inclusion»[79].

The question of how to interact with museum professionals in order to transform well-established practices and habits of the mind comes up time and again in the scholarship. Intimately connected with this practical intent is a distinct focus on feminist theory, in all its ramifications, as the purveyor of analytical insights that can best be tested and put to work in concrete situations. According to Hilde Hein, «feminist theorizing is a dynamic process that should be realized in practice, and I propose the museum as an exemplary site to gauge

[73] Ivi, p. 35.
[74] Robert 2016, p. 25.
[75] Hein 2010, p. 54.
[76] Grahn 2011, p. 225.
[77] Robert 2015, p. 26. On intersectionality as a method of analysis see Landry 2007.
[78] Robert 2014, p. 30.
[79] *Ibidem*.

its effectiveness»[80]. Starting from the premise that some concepts, elaborated by feminist theorists – the critique of hierarchies, universalism and the subject-object dualism, for instance – would allow museums to perform their task more effectively, Hein suggests some «modifications of strategy»[81] that should be adopted to make museums more inclusive and egalitarian.

It is worth considering Hein's modifications in more detail. Abandoning a falsely genderless language, as discussed in the previous section of this article, is the *sine qua non* condition for change; Hein more specifically proposes that museums should avoid conceiving of the ideal visitor as a neutral subject, a «disembodied and dispassionate observer»[82]. Envisioning the visitor not as a universalised subject would have significant bearings on the choices museums make about objects on display, explanatory narratives and even spatial arrangements. Secondly, «[m]useums should stop foregrounding the exceptional»[83]: this solicitation evokes the vexed question of canonicity, which feminist historians, art historians and literary and cultural critics have long debated[84]. The mechanisms of canon formation, embedded as they are in social and institutional contexts, have tended to consecrate the exceptional as the expression of white, male and middle-class values and perspectives. They have also emphasised the singular to the detriment of the plural, in teleological narratives of progress set against an underexplored panorama of "secondary" or minor experiments. Museums have reproduced the «myths of the exemplary» as an integral part of their didactic vocation. Turning a «quizzical eye» upon this vocation is essential as new «claimants», Hein observes, are voicing rightful demands[85]. It is not by revising the canon, through incremental additions, that radical changes occur, but by rethinking the ideological assumptions of canonicity, and experimenting with different ways of reframing the relation between foreground and background. Similarly, the classification systems and categories museums are accustomed to employ (national origin, chronology, geography, to name a few) should be «de-emphasized»[86], making room for alternative ways of reconfiguring subject-object intra-actions, or more creative patterns of display that reveal unexpected relations and intersections.

Like Hein's modifications, the strategies discussed in the scholarship on feminist curating insist on the need for systemic change in institutional structures at various levels, from the selection, organisation and classification of objects in exhibitions and collections, to re-envisioning the museum as a

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[80] Hein 2010, p. 54.
[81] Ivi, p. 58.
[82] *Ibidem.*
[83] Ivi, p. 59.
[84] See Pollock 1999; Iskin 2017.
[85] Hein 2010, p. 60.
[86] Ivi, p. 62.

participatory and community-oriented environment[87]. As Griselda Pollock observes «feminist theory is not the mere critical apologia for feminist or women's art. It is the critical and theoretical analysis of (colonial, racist, homophobic) phallocentrism by which we grasp art itself in more complex ways that include difference in its many manifestations»[88]. The joining of feminism and curating is not a recent phenomenon; it dates back to the l960s and 1970s and has produced, by now, a sizable body of scholarship. So much so that, according to Elke Krasny, one could speak of «a feminist turn in curating»[89], characterised not only by continuous attention to women's and feminist art, but also by the use of feminist methodologies to innovate the labour of curating. Starting from the premise that curating is a form of knowledge production and, as such, it is always gendered, Dorothee Richter identifies four categories that are central to the project of feminist curating: 1) attention to gender equality in terms of numbers; 2) correct citing of historical references, which means taking into account not just the «singled out artistic geniuses, or stars» but entire movements, questioning the paradigm of authorship; 3) disturbing or unsettling «easy narratives»; 4) «institutional critique» which entails using curatorial methods to call into question «distribution, production and reception, all aspects of the art system that are still inflected with patriarchal orderings»[90].

Along similar lines, Elke Krasny theorises what she terms «curatorial materialism»[91], a form of co-dependent (rather than independent) curating, while Maura Reilly has coined the expression «curatorial activism», to connote a counter-hegemonic practice committed to programming initiatives that give voice to «artists who are non-white, non-Euro-US, as well as women-, feminist- and queer-identified»[92]. Reilly's book *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (2018) is both a celebration of the corrective work performed by activist curators over the course of many years, and a manifesto for change in the art world based on the premise that all curators should assume the ethical responsibility of addressing overt discrimination. Other examples could be quoted to showcase the vivacity of the current debate on feminist curating. The two-volume collection edited by Joanna C. Ashton, *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption, and Change* (2017 and 2018), for example, gathers several essays that investigate how museums are responding to socio-political challenges, highlighting the «potential social value of feminism in museums as a political ethos and a driver of local, national, and global change»[93] (Ashton

[87] See Deepwell 2006; Dimitrakaki, Perry 2013; Krasny, Frauenmuseum 2013; Robert 2014; Jones 2016.
[88] Pollock 2010, p. 131.
[89] Krasny 2015, p. 53.
[90] Richter 2016, p. 65 and p. 67.
[91] Krasny 2016.
[92] Reilly 2018, p. 22.
[93] Ashton 2017a, p. 51.

2017). These publications testify to a resurgence of interest in the political project of feminism, now expanded to include the interests of a wider constituency of "others".

Inspirational though they are, however, these discussions rarely include specific protocols for change or operational instructions. Transforming institutional behaviours is no easy task, but it is one that needs to be tackled in both theoretical and practical terms. On this score, two contributions included in the collection of essays *Gender and Heritage* (2018) are deserving of attention. Wera Grahn has developed a model to assess the degrees of gender integration in museum exhibitions, which could also be used to gauge other forms of discrimination (class, ethnicity, race etc.). The spectrum of possibilities ranges from «gender blindness» (no sign of gender awareness is discernible in the planning of an exhibition), to «gender/intersectional focus» (intersectional approaches permeate the whole exhibition)[94]. Between these two poles lies a series of intermediate positions – «addition», «registering», «visibility» – that denote partial or intermittent modes of integration. The value of this model does not rest on its taxonomic distinctions. Rather, its overall relevance derives from its applicability as a tool devised to guide museum professionals and curators in the process of implementing gender in heritage work. Grahn is well aware that working towards a greater integration of gendered perspectives in heritage institutions also entails relying on the knowledge of gender experts: «To apply a gender or diversity perspective requires skills, competence and acquired knowledge, which surprisingly enough is not especially evident in current job advertisements for new positions in heritage institutions»[95]. But even if in-house experts are not always available, Grahn's model could still be employed to raise the gender awareness of the leading management team in any given institution.

Smilla Ebeling's guidebook *Museum & Gender. Ein Leitfaden* (2016), developed in close dialogue with the staff members of four regional museums in Germany, is explicitly designed for all types of museum actors, including staff and volunteers without prior knowledge of gender. As Ebeling rightly remarks, transferring «research results into applicable means for museums, particularly for museums with little financial and personal resources»[96] is as important a challenge as producing more elaborate research on the topic of gender and museums. Organised around a series of questions and sub-questions grouped under five categories (representation; forms of mediation; workforce structure; target groups; and budget), Ebeling's concise booklet aims to raise awareness about the complexity of gender issues in museums, by simply posing targeted questions which encourage museum staff to reflect more critically on their own

[94] Grahn 2018, p. 263.
[95] Ivi, p. 259.
[96] Ebeling 2018, p. 76.

practices[97]. For Grahn and Ebeling, gender politics issues should be tackled in the heritage sector at both micro- and macro-levels, fostering collaborations between scholars and museum professionals that help to bring theory and praxis into closer contact.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the debate on gender and heritage is also being conducted in what has come to be defined as "para-academia", namely the lively sphere where bloggers regularly intervene, capturing the attention of a diversified audience. One example among many is the Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM), «a coalition of individuals (and organizations) committed to raising awareness about gender inequity in the museum workplace and offering resources for change»[98]. Several specific concerns are addressed in the various blogs linked to the GEMM website, from the gender pay gap, to questions of leadership and inclusivity. The latter is particularly prominent in «The Incluseum» project, launched in 2012 by Aletheia Wittman and Rose Paquet Kinsley[99]. While the Incluseum blog functions as a platform for critical dialogue, the project also offers «actionable suggestions» to heritage institutions about how to enact inclusion. Once again, it is the fruitful intermingling of critical reflection and praxis that characterises the vivacious exchange of opinions and experiences occurring in the para-academic space of museum blogs.

4. *Conclusion*

The aim of this overview of the critical literature on gender and cultural heritage has been twofold: first, to showcase the richness of a debate that may occupy a marginal position in the broader fields of heritage studies and museology, but is in no way irrelevant to the challenges now faced by heritage institutions; secondly, to draw attention to concrete proposals and suggestions formulated in the literature under review. These proposals are characterised by varying degrees of specificity and may not always be articulated in operational terms, but they all spring from the same commitment to turn criticism into transformative action. It is worth summarising, in a more schematic manner, the recommendations and suggestions that scholars have put forward as strategies for change.

   1. The use of gender-blind language (in texts, documents, conventions, museum interpretations etc.) ought to be avoided as it tends to perpetrate

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[97] Ebeling 2016. Ebeling's guidbeook is in German; it is to be hoped that it will soon be translated into English and disseminated more widely.

[98] See <https://www.genderequitymuseums.com/about-us>, 25.05.2018.

[99] See <https://incluseum.com/about/>, 25.05.2018.

masculinist assumptions under the false pretence of neutrality. Explicit recognition of gender is appropriate in all heritage situations.

2. Devising a specific framework of gender analysis suitable for the heritage sector would go a long way towards ensuring that indifference or blindness to gender and diversity issues is not automatically reproduced.

3. 'Counting' or number crunching is a useful strategy to call institutions out for sexist practice. Quantitative analyses that expose overt discriminations in heritage institutions and the art world are necessary, since gender equality is still a *goal* not an accomplished *fact*.

4. Feminist epistemologies and gender knowledge are powerful intellectual tools to push for changes in heritage discourse and museum practices. While this proposition has a theoretical rather than practical bent, it has given rise to interesting experiments such as, for instance, Robert's applied intersectional approach to museums, Hein's potential «modifications» and Reilly's ethically inflected notion of «curatorial activism».

5. Develop guidelines and models to help museum and heritage professionals achieve greater integration of gender and diversity issues in museum exhibitions. Guidelines and toolkits for gender mainstreaming in the development sector are not lacking; what scholars like Grahn and Ebeling are proposing are models targeted specifically to the museum sector, with an emphasis not only on gender but also on other forms of difference.

While these suggestions may not amount to a fully-fledged programme or plan of action, they do provide a blueprint of dissent that helps identify structural problems and imagine alternative pathways to viable solutions. After many decades of women's activism, when commitments to mainstreaming gender equality are being endorsed on a global scale, and gender research is growing fast in terms of size and complexity, it is quite surprising that the heritage sector should prove rather reluctant to welcome gendered perspectives, as several of the scholars whose work I have considered in this article repeatedly claim. «It would seem so simple», Griselda Pollock avers,

to imagine, document and archive a history of twentieth-century and contemporary art that is historically inclusive not only in terms of gender but also of other sites and axes of difference that currently function to render many peoples, experiences and positions invisible. But it is not. For the entire feminist enterprise has not yet been able to fully explain and change the conditions under which the simplest premise of historical accuracy was refused and even rendered unthinkable or incompatible with what emerged in its place as the history of art and the value system by which it would operate[100].

Whether one agrees entirely or only partially with Pollock's assessment, the point she makes about the «simplest premise of historical accuracy» being disregarded in art history as well as, one could add, in many representations

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[100] Pollock 2010, p. 135.

and narratives that heritage institutions offer to the public, should give pause for thought. In what Gábor Sonkoly and Tanja Vahtikari define as the «third cultural heritage regime», characterised by an expansion of cultural heritage «in terms of concepts, significance and numbers of sites and elements» and by a shift towards a «value-oriented (or subject-oriented) approach»[101], Pollock's criterion of simple "accuracy" may stand a better chance of being adopted more widely. Much will depend, of course, on the willingness of scholars and critics, like Pollock herself, to go on interrogating the various authorised heritage discourses that reproduce, at the local, national and international level, gender-blind selection and interpretation criteria. Ultimately, whether gendered perspectives will become mainstream, or remain proudly marginal, the demand for change forcefully articulated in all the contributions this article has reviewed is likely to gain further traction in the years ahead, as museums and heritage institutions look for novel ways to re-imagine their social and cultural role.

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[101] Sonkoly, Vahtikari 2018, p. 11.

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