The impact of the ‘posts’— poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism — on the writing of Anglo-American women’s and gender history was considerable, though this varied according to the thematic area covered, existing national and local historiographies, and the temporal, social, and political context in which the historian was writing. Poststructuralism’s emphasis on decentring grand theory, on questioning all metanarratives and attending to the power of discourse, and on challenging western narratives of the self and of human progress likely had more influence on areas such as cultural history than on labour history, the latter perhaps clinging to unstated materialist suppositions. Writing emanating from the United States appeared more deeply influenced by poststructuralism than that from Britain and Canada, though the sheer volume and variety of gender history coming out of the US makes me wary of any firm conclusions in this regard.\(^1\) While some American-based feminists have balked at the claim by one social historian that Marxist social history maintained stronger roots in Britain,\(^2\) there may be some element of truth to this — that is, while Marxist- and socialist-feminists existed and continue to exist in the United States, they may have become even more marginalized (especially so Marxist-feminists) than in other countries. Some American scholars have argued that US-based feminism became (to its detriment) equated with poststructuralism, or that some poststructuralist writing ‘made sense’ to academics precisely because it was a loose ‘fit’ with the juggernaut of liberal, and even neoliberal ideology that had gained popular hegemony by the late 1980s.\(^3\) This was not so much a conscious political choice to abandon the Left for liberal ideas (indeed many academics believed they were still progressives committed
to social change) as much as an ideological convergence that occurred in the wake of the decline of the Left, dismissals of Marxism, and the insidious ideological diffusion of liberal assumptions into all crooks and crannies of cultural life. Certainly, national and social contexts matter in the reception of new theoretical paradigms. There is some evidence, for instance, that writing on gender and labour in developing areas such as Latin America or Africa embraced poststructuralism less completely and enthusiastically, simply because these historians, influenced by the anti-imperialist struggles around them, continued to explore women’s lives using methods drawn from social history, political economy, and historical materialism. Postcolonialism, to be sure, had an impact on these historiographies, but it was also ambiguous, complex, and critical. ⁴

Where did Canadian women’s history fit in? Perhaps we stood somewhere in between Britain and the United States, continuing to use theoretical approaches associated with the new (now ‘old’) social history, yet also sometimes challenging those with, and through ‘post’ theories. The specific variety of ‘post’ writing, and what area of history it addressed, also mattered a great deal. Arguably, the most influential thinker for Canadian feminist historians was Michel Foucault, whose explorations of regulation, discipline, and the discursive construction of sexuality greatly influenced feminist writing on criminalization, the law, sexuality, and the body. Postcolonial theory also made a strong impression, dovetailing with a significant expansion of research on First Nations women, ‘internal’ colonialism, and imperial history. The productive and sometimes provocative impact of both Foucault and postcolonial studies was clear by the 1990s, in writing by Mariana Valverde, Stephen Maynard, Mary Louise Adams, Mona Gleason, Sarah Carter, and Adele Perry, to name a few authors.⁵

Both Foucauldian and colonial studies are represented in this section, suggesting either (positively) that I was moving with the times or (negatively) that I was caught in the fashion of the times. The writing on criminalization and delinquency, however, was also the unintended outcome of my “Pardon Tales” research: explorations of crime and punishment led me to records dealing with juveniles and inevitably to writing on moral and sexual regulation. The contrast between women’s courtroom pardon tales — sometimes inventive and brazen — and the case files of girls in
court or incarcerated could not have been greater. Reading the latter, in particular, could not but evoke an emotional response (not the least because I had teenage daughters at the time). While girls entangled in the juvenile justice system cannot be seen simply as victims (and I tried not to portray them so), the circumstances of abuse, violence, poverty, neglect, and racism that jumped off page after page of these records were difficult, disheartening, and angering to read. I can recall driving home to Peterborough from the archives in Toronto, with girls’ unhappy, scared, and sometimes defiant voices playing repeatedly in my head. I say this knowing full well that these sources, and particularly case files, are hardly unmediated sources, offering us the ‘true,’ inside story: quite the contrary. The records, as I admit in “Girls in Conflict with the Law,” were shaped profoundly by expert discourses and by their interpretations of the girls’ behaviour, and these documents may tell us more about those expert discourses than about the girls’ actual experiences. I think one can ‘fall into’ these records too easily, accepting the experts’ priorities, and in a subsequent article I tried to correct my earlier tendency to do so. Because the experts of the time were so concerned, if not obsessed, with describing sexual misbehaviour, I inevitably focused on this issue, perhaps downplaying another crucial aspect of the disciplinary solution they were promoting: honest work and the work ethic.

Still, I would argue that girls’ case files — especially in conjunction with other sources — offer snatches of girls’ own interpretations and important traces of their social and material existence. That social existence was crucial to my argument that a feminist appropriation of Foucault was not enough: without understanding the relations of production and social reproduction that framed these girls’ lives (including patriarchal familial relations), and without understanding the legacies of colonialism, we could not completely understand how many girls became designated as delinquents by the experts, by the state, and by their own families. Foucault helped me understand the ‘how’ of criminalization, but not entirely the ‘why.’ Feminist theoretical writing that recognized how Foucault’s writing had enriched and pushed feminist discussion in new directions, yet still engaged with it critically, was essential to my thinking, along with older writing informed by historical materialism. Whether they were describing Foucault’s slighting of agency, the contradictions inherent in
his notion of resistance, his tendency to downplay the coercive power of the state, or his failure to analyze some forms of patriarchal power, these feminist and critical legal theorists provided me with indispensable insights on criminalization and moral regulation.8

Postcolonial writing probably had a stronger impact in Canadian literary studies than in history, where one was less likely to find the ‘foundational’ writing by Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Edward Said used and quoted. It was not these celebrated texts as much as critical legal studies that shaped my thinking on Aboriginal women and the law, as well as the work of anthropologists like John and Jean Comaroff and Ann Stoler (herself influenced by Foucault), which elucidated the connections between sexual regulation, the imposition of ‘white’ domesticity, and colonial conquest, even though they were discussing quite different colonial situations.9 In trying to understand the overincarceration of Canadian Aboriginal women in particular, I was influenced by the writing of First Nations scholars like Teressaa Nahanee and by anthropologists like Jo-Anne Fiske, who had developed a complex interpretation of customary law that incorporated both a critique of colonialism and a feminist analysis.10

Also, one could not talk about the criminalization of women without talking about race, not least because it stared us in the face in contemporary revelations about the overincarceration and mistreatment of women of colour and Aboriginal women in Canadian penal institutions. This was brought home when I read Yvonne Johnson’s powerful and moving life history, A Stolen Life, as well as in the official, and disturbing, reports about Kingston’s P4W,11 and my involvement with Elizabeth Fry offered constant reminders of the practical, daily struggles of criminalized women, whose lives were not only ‘governed from a distance.’ As my colleague Gillian Balfour warned, the scholarly drift towards Foucaudian governmentality as the explanatory paradigm of choice risked severing feminist criminology from an activist, political scholarship and praxis that exposed both the social causes of criminalization and the “brute” force of the neoliberal state on women’s lives.12

My own experience at Trent also pushed my writing in the direction of Aboriginal history: Indigenous Studies was not only an influential presence within the university, but also an integral part of our graduate program, so I was continually challenged by my own students and colleagues
to integrate Aboriginal women more effectively into my writing. Postcolonial scholarship was so much ‘in the air’ in these endeavours that it undoubtedly had an impact on my thinking, stimulating new questions about the changing cultural meanings of colonialism. Those questions then came to the fore when I began to explore white women’s travel books and images of Aboriginal peoples in popular culture. Ironically, it was many trips to second-hand bookstores in the United States with my book-collecting partner that led to my discovery of so many travel books on the Canadian North. Postcolonial scholarship on literature, travel writing, and visual culture then helped me ‘see’ literary devices and discursive strategies I might not have noticed otherwise when I began to analyze them for my article on the construction of the ‘Eskimo’ wife. Even still, in all these articles, I often circled back to ‘postcolonial’ scholars like Arif Dirlik, who offered what I thought was an incisive critique of postcolonial writing that concentrated on the cultural, while ignoring the social and material context of global capitalism. Neither Aboriginal women’s criminalization nor the discursive expressions of colonial ‘mentalities’ could be understood apart from the context that framed them, including the incessant drive for capitalist accumulation as well as the social relations that accompanied colonial conquest.

Notes

1 Some critical theorists did argue that the American academy was especially receptive to postmodernism. “Much postmodernism has sprung from the United States, or at least has taken rapid root there, and reflects some of that country’s most intractable political problems”: Terry Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernism (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 122.


My thinking was influenced by my collaboration with Tamara Myers: “Retorts, Runaways and Riots: Patterns of Resistance in Canadian Reform Schools for Girls, 1930–60” *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 669–97.


