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Historic Heteroessentialism and Other Orderings in Early America

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Comments

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Historical narratives—the stories we tell each other about the past—have direct bearing on contemporary political discourse. The influence of historical narrative is most apparent concerning the period of the nation's founding, and this is often demonstrated by those who seek to maintain structures of racist and sexist oppression. Conservative pundits, activists, and scholars regularly refer to founding fathers and traditional values (from the original intent of the Constitution to the values of patriarchal families) in order to support arguments about a whole host of contemporary social and political issues. Readers will find much evidence to counter these often simplistic, ahistorical, and damaging claims about family structures, attitudes toward premarital sex, the relationship between church and state, and many other issues by attending to women's history. The books reviewed here address issues of power, agency, oppression, and change. Analytical categories such as race, gender, and sexuality frame the most exciting new work, offering textured perspectives on the use, abuse, and distribution of power in various realms of society. These studies are sophisticated in their attempt to integrate analyses of gender as well as of women, the experiences of women of different races as well as how race functions, and sexuality in terms of desire and intimacy, as well as how power frames and gives meaning to sexuality.

In *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (2006), author Judith Bennett identifies two major problems with the state of the field of women's and gender history. The first problem is the depoliticization of recent scholarship. The acceptance of women academics and

I am greatly indebted to Nancy Hewitt and Kathleen Brown for reading multiple drafts of this essay and challenging me to be more precise; to Jan Lewis, Jim Downs, Brian Connolly, Scott Wilds, and Michal Shapira for engaging conversations that shaped my understanding of the ideas presented; to the readers at *Signs* for their very constructive and thoughtful feedback; to members of the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Rutgers, particularly Barbara Balliet and Mary Hawkesworth; and to my community of friends and scholars at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies.

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feminist scholarship in the academy has, she argues, resulted in the political co-optation of scholarship on women's history (Bennett 2006, 20). Indeed, the success of some feminist demands for institutional and disciplinary change has led to the dissolution of feminist communities and organized activism among academics. The second issue involves the neglect among feminist scholars, including women's historians, of the pre-modern past and the lessons it holds for us. Bennett demonstrates the waning interest of feminists in pre-twentieth-century history by surveying articles printed in feminist and historical journals. The emphasis on modern history (1800 to the present) is most striking in her tabulation of the articles published in journals such as *Gender and History*, the *Journal of Women's History*, and *Women's History Review*. From 2001 to 2004, only 11 percent of the articles published in these journals concerned the early modern period (1500–1800) and a paltry 2 percent the premodern period (before 1500; Bennett 2006, 32). Bennett quickly dismisses the possibility that such percentages represent a lack of original scholarship concerning women's lives in the premodern era and argues persuasively for why feminists have much to learn from such studies.

Bennett offers three compelling explanations for this presentist trend: first, the loss of the belief that women experienced a golden age in the premodern era; second, a lack of interest in historical perspective among feminist scholars in other disciplines; and third, the shifting attention toward a study of women's history beyond the West (Bennett 2006, 37). She notes, "For women's history specifically, the trend since the 1970s can best be discerned in *Signs*, which not only has *less history* than it once did but also *different sorts of history*: proportionately less pre-1800 Western history, less history that crosses over several eras, and more non-Western and global history. Only the predominance of the modern West has stayed constant and, indeed, expanded a bit" (41).¹ While feminist scholars and women's and gender historians have grown less interested in the long ago past, the historical profession has actually increasingly accepted the legitimacy of work that raises questions about gender, sexuality, and power.

The aim of this essay is to highlight recent trends in the field of women's and gender history in early North America and to demonstrate why it holds value for feminist academics and activists alike. Women first claimed a major role in the historiography of the early republic through Linda

¹ Bennett concedes that her argument is based on a small sample: "thirty-eight history essays in 1975–1978 and only nine in 2001–2004" (Bennett 2006, 41).

Kerber's now ubiquitous concept of republican motherhood.² Kerber showed that women were indeed valued members of the new republic and were held to be important political agents despite not having access to formal political authority or power. Instead, women were important because in their role as mothers they shaped the next generation of republican citizens.³ Kerber's (1980) thesis has been widely incorporated into the dominant historical narrative of the field, truly carving out a space for mainly northern, white, and prosperous women. Twenty-five years after its original publication, the concept of republican motherhood remains a celebrated dimension of women's history among early Americanists for two reasons. First, it is a compelling thesis that identifies women's power, albeit in an unthreatening, socially normative way. The thought of a virtuous, civic-minded white woman reviewing a son's homework by lantern light in a small but cozy brick colonial in Boston or Philadelphia is charming and comforting. The second reason for its staying power is the real intellectual and political challenge posed by newer feminist scholarship that moves beyond analysis of women's roles and unpacks the intricate power relationships among race, gender, and sexuality. Incorporation of this work would require a much more radical reconceptualization not only of women's lives but of the entire colonial and postcolonial project.

Such work, published in the mid-1990s, transformed our historical vision of women's lives by revealing how power mediated relationships between individuals and groups of people along lines of race, class, and gender.⁴ In *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996), Kathleen Brown models a sophisticated analysis of how intersections of race and gender shaped several important developments in the history of slavery in Virginia, including how cultural differences in gender roles informed the conflicts between Native Americans and English colonists and how racial slavery was given legitimacy and meaning through gender differences. Brown also unpacks elite white women's stake in the dissolution of a potential class-based alliance between poor blacks and whites, a dissolution achieved by privileging white farmers and emphasizing racial supremacy. She demonstrates the instability of identities by showing how

² Two book-length studies of women in the early republic by feminist historians were published in 1980. See Kerber 1980; Norton 1980.

³ This argument has been engaged and challenged by several historians, most convincingly by Jan Lewis (1987), who has shown that marriage—not motherhood—was the most important social and therefore political relationship. See also Bloch 2003, 39.

⁴ See, e.g., Smith-Rosenberg 1992; Ditz 1994; Juster 1994; Dayton 1995; Brown 1996.

those in pursuit of social, political, and economic power constructed and manipulated social differences. By documenting historically what many feminists activists have been arguing for decades—that race and gender are inseparable in analyses of identity, experience, and systems of power and oppression—Brown and others inspired the next wave of scholarship that is the subject of this essay. Dissertation topics, conference panels, and articles in leading journals concerning questions of women, race, gender, and sexuality reveal the excitement generated by these findings and the sense of possibilities for reinterpreting the classic narratives of American history. But the production of such paradigm-shifting knowledge is still very much a feminist project, with implications both inside and far beyond the walls of academia.

This essay will focus on two major themes in the field—one very old and one very new. It has long been a staple question of early American historians to explore the impact of the American Revolution, and several new studies consider its role in shaping women's educational, political, and sexual opportunities and decisions. An exciting and long-awaited development in early American history—the arrival of sexuality studies—is the second theme. The wave of book-length publications on the history of sexuality in recent years marks a watershed in the field. The essay will consider these findings in relation to such important feminist theoretical and methodological issues as agency and oppression, intersecting identities, the impact of gender studies on women's studies, and the value and limits of theories of power.

Questions of sex and sexuality have always played some role in early American women's history. The 1990s saw studies of women's role in legal and judicial proceedings, attempts to regulate reproduction, and the abuse of women at the hands of their masters (see, e.g., Dayton 1991; Clinton and Gillespie 1997; Klepp 1998). The development of the field of lesbian and gay studies also inspired articles on sodomy (Murrin 1998); a transgender, possibly intersex colonist (Brown 1995); and Native American berdache (Blackwood 1984). So sexuality studies in early American history is not entirely new, but the widespread interest in and acceptance of this line of historical inquiry is.

A significant turning point for this development was the 2001 "Sexuality in Early America" conference, cosponsored by the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, and cochaired by Kathleen Brown and Sharon Block. The conference, attended predominantly by early American historians and literary scholars, signaled the acceptance of sexuality as a valid analytical category in the field. Its sponsorship by two of the most prom-

inent institutions fostering early American history also served as a tacit acknowledgment that the work was cutting edge and promised to open new avenues of historical connection and analysis.⁵ Subsequent publication of the papers in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, a journal noted for representing the state of the field that had rarely delved into sexuality studies before, broadcast this as a watershed moment. The meeting also revealed the possibility that such theoretical framings might serve to connect the literature of early American history to the more feminist historical scholarship of the recent past and women's, gender, and sexuality studies. Recent monographs by many of the conference participants show that the history of sexuality is an exciting, paradigm-shifting topic that promises to add layers of complexity to what we know about the colonial and early national periods. These studies include Kirsten Fischer's *Suspect Relations* (2002), Richard Godbeer's *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (2002), Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women* (2004), Sharon Block's *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (2006), Clare Lyons's *Sex among the Rabble* (2006), Thomas Foster's *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man* (2006), and Juliana Barr's *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman* (2007).

Several studies center the body as a site of significant historical inquiry and meaning (see especially Lindman and Tarter 2001). In *Suspect Relations*, Fischer demonstrates the hardening of racial categories in North Carolina through laws that increasingly treated African Americans differently from whites as the eighteenth century progressed. This was done primarily through the regulation of African American bodies—by restricting their sexual autonomy and condoning increasingly severe physical violence as legitimate forms of punishment. In her study of slavery in South Carolina and Barbados, *Laboring Women*, Morgan shows that representations of African women were racialized and sexualized in European travel writings, laying the groundwork for attitudes toward women of African descent in America. Racism, of course, did not always look the same, nor did it function in the same way. Morgan shows that European attitudes that differentiated African from European women were explicitly sexual—tied to childbirth, nudity, and nursing. Sexuality and gender were thus racialized. African women were considered distinct because of these perceived sexual traits and behaviors, including physical hardiness to endure agricultural labor, distended breasts from nursing infants, and a lack of pain during childbirth. These distinctions formed the heart of the justification for racial slavery. These ideas, well documented in travel narratives, circulated

⁵ Conference papers served as the basis of a special issue of the premier journal of colonial and early American history, the *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003).

through Europe via coffeehouses, libraries, and salons long before most Englishmen ever encountered a woman of African descent.

While some historians struggle to merge methods of social history and discourse analysis, Morgan skillfully navigates this terrain by showing both how constitutive the experiences of reproduction and production were in the lives of slave women and how popular representations reflected how slaveholders interpreted them. Just as labor in the fields was work for women, so too was sexual reproduction in that it provided the next generation of laborers. Most significantly, she demonstrates that there is no such thing as “natural” increase in reproduction rates within a slave society. Morgan offers much to the scholar interested in the slave trade, creolization, and plantation life, but her main contributions are twofold. First, she shows that racialized notions of sexuality were central to the establishment of slavery. Second, she demonstrates that histories of women’s lives and analyses of gendered power need not—indeed, should not—be mutually exclusive.

The meaning of the act of sex is more centrally the focus of Sharon Block’s ambitious study of rape in colonial America throughout the long eighteenth century. *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (2006) offers an invaluable contribution for feminists and historians alike by tracing the roots of the belief that women consented by feigning resistance. Block’s main findings will not surprise, as many of the dominant social attitudes toward rape victims and likely perpetrators have remained quite consistent throughout American history: a woman’s sexual past, social standing, a verifiable effort to resist, and willingness to report the attack would all determine her believability as a victim. Women, past and present, considered a wide range of factors before determining whether or not to come forward with an accusation. With regard to the early American period, Block demonstrates the importance of women’s community networks to this process, as a woman was most likely to tell a family member first and decide to make her accusation public only with the support of female kin and friends. Sometimes observations by family members, friends, and even strangers led others to raise the issue of assault. Despite the importance of women in supporting each other, validating a victim’s claim, and enlisting male relatives and community members to believe the victim, a woman’s role in shaping events was ultimately insignificant. Block tells us that in the end male family members of the victim determined whether or not a public accusation would be made—and how seriously it would be taken.

The social status of the accused and his relationship to the victim determined the likelihood that a man would be found guilty, but nothing

weighed as heavily as race. The race of both the victim and the accused determined the course of an accusation, trial, prosecution, conviction, and sentencing related to charges of sexual coercion or rape. Block uses both court cases and cultural representations to make this case and does it quite convincingly. Though widespread public discourse of uncontrollable black male sexuality does not emerge until after the Civil War, social and legal practices aimed at regulating black men and women were rooted in seventeenth-century slave codes and were strengthened throughout the eighteenth century. Of the 174 men executed for rape between 1700 and 1820, Block shows that a whopping 80 percent of them were men of African descent (163). This in and of itself fuels the impression of uncontrollable black male sexuality.

In *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution* (2006), Clare Lyons straddles the oldest and newest questions in the field concerning the impact of the American Revolution on women's lives and the role of sexuality in this process. Lyons dramatically expands our knowledge of sexual practices in Philadelphia. Most surprising is her argument for a widespread pleasure culture in the colonial period, marked by rampant sex outside of marriage, including adultery, prostitution, and premarital sex. The American Revolution, rather than liberating the sexual desires and practices of women and men, actually led to a tightening of sexual norms. Lyons traces this development through popular culture, social custom, and increasingly enforced laws. Middle- and upper-class white men still maintained a wide range of sexual privileges, but their female counterparts were held to more rigorous standards of virtue, restraint, and sexual repression.

The idea that personal freedom can be defined by sexual acts may be overargued in Lyons's account, as others have noted (see Eastman 2007). While a high incidence of bastardy may signal sexual freedom—it may also signal the economic and social vulnerability of women. In her study of middle- and upper-class white women during the same period, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (2006), Mary Kelly finds that despite the power afforded them by their increasing access to education and opportunities to express their ideas in print and oratory, even this group of women experienced domesticity as the defining aspect of their lives. Part of what makes Lyons's argument compelling, in contrast, is that some of her actors deliberately eschewed the confines of conventional domesticity. Yet while some women expressed great satisfaction in their work as prostitutes, others undoubtedly would have welcomed a wider range of employment opportunities for single women.

While Lyons demonstrates that interracial sexual encounters were commonly accepted in the Philadelphia area during the revolutionary period, these were not without great risk for African American men, as Block has demonstrated. Class status is the most significant marker that shaped the experience of interracial couples in the various studies. According to Lyons, such dalliances were tolerated among the lower classes. While this is not a surprising finding for the most cosmopolitan city in North America at the time, particularly given the dynamic pluralism that marked Pennsylvania's early history, this thesis also has limits. Fischer (2002) has argued that in North Carolina interracial relationships among the lower classes were viewed as extremely threatening because of their potential to blur the lines of racial difference through mixed-race children and to facilitate other cross-racial social and political alliances. Block's (2006) study of sexual coercion and rape suggests that men of African descent—regardless of their class or that of their accuser—were always regarded as suspect when rape was alleged. Block shows that gender roles—and the perception of a woman's ability to exercise control of her sexual desire or willingly consent—were also rooted in dominant perceptions of racial difference.

The role of husbands, or of their absence, varies widely across these studies. In Morgan's (2004) work, marriages and intimate relationships between slave men and women were not valued. Probate records regularly designated women with children and only occasionally listed male partners or husbands. For slave women, intimate committed relationships with men were rarely acknowledged socially or legally and offered them few protections. For the white women in Block's (2006) study, it was a mixed story. Women were vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances, coercions, and assaults by all of the men in their family, including husbands, fathers, stepfathers, and uncles. These same men, however, often advocated on behalf of female family members in bringing charges against other men for similar behaviors. In Lyons's (2006) study, marriage is framed as the antithesis of freedom—sexual and otherwise—for women. Sex outside of marriage, as Lyons describes it, was rampant—leaving one with a much clearer picture of married men frequenting bawdy and disorderly houses. In this corrective to the historiographical emphasis on women as wives and their dependency on men in this period, Lyons's work is refreshing. Karin Wulf's compelling study of single women, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (2000), also expands our understanding of women's lives by showing how single women navigated the colonial city with autonomy and authority, shaping the economic, cultural, and social landscape as much as it shaped them. Wulf demonstrates that despite the historiographic focus on married women during this period, remaining

single was common in early modern cities, in part because the economy required the labor of these women and enabled their independence. Even for those women who did eventually marry, it was a temporary state of togetherness that usually ended with their widowhood. Viewing marriage as a small part of women's lives rather than as the central defining moment gives new weight to the significance of other areas of women's lives. Most importantly for this essay, Wulf shows that by looking at a broader view of women's economic, familial, political, and social relationships, we can see the systems that shaped the parameters of their sexual and relational freedom.

Sexual authority and autonomy for white men was quite a different picture and is at the heart of Thomas Foster's book, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America* (2006). Foster examines the range of institutions that gave meaning to and set the limits for male sexual expression. Religious, legal, and popular attitudes toward male sexual desire and restraint sometimes conflicted with one another. Since very few men were convicted of rape or accused of paternity out of wedlock, it seems reasonable to conclude that the state of Massachusetts gave most white men a free pass for most sexual activities. It is not surprising that men of African descent were more likely to be convicted of rape, showing that this freedom was limited by social status and, most significantly, race. Foster shows that even as victims of rape, women were secondary characters in the social and political narrative that ensued, framing the rape of a woman as more of an affront to her husband than to her. As Foster concludes, based on his analysis of the material and on his consideration of queer theory, "Rape was a crime between men as well as a crime against a woman. Symbolically it was less an affront to womanhood than an assault on male household authority: a court case involving a rape charge was an insult to the father or husband of the victim" (2006, 55). Block (2006) similarly demonstrates the ways that rape was viewed as a crime between men. And Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) has argued that men primarily value their relationships with each other and use heterosexual women both to compete with each other and to mediate their mutual desire. Applied to eighteenth-century masculinity studies, this concept offers greater insight into the feelings, motives, and actions of male family members of victims. While such an interpretation threatens to mask or invalidate the trauma of a female victim, it also further inscribes a heteronormative social order as a means by which men demonstrate their power.

Sympathetic and sensationalistic depictions of violent assaults on white women are not a new national phenomenon. While the function of such

images and narratives is historically particular, the main characters—white, female victims and either white or African American male assailants—remain quite constant. News accounts of such crimes have generally sought to inspire outrage and intrigue among readers. In the eighteenth century, Massachusetts newspapers provided rich and unnecessary details to excite and attract readers. Foster writes, “Underscoring the brutality of the attack, the grisly details stand out with almost pornographic clarity” (2006, 62). Much of Foster’s book is not about rape or assault at all but rather the expectation that men restrain their sexual desires. This was most important for white men, as normative men were expected to keep their sexual selves in check. Nonnormative men include “men of color, homosexuals, and those for whom sexual urges are said to be uncontrollable” (x). Sexual assault was the manifestation of a man’s inability to exhibit “manly self-control” (141). Religious tracts and sermons calling for men to restrain their sexual urges form the central basis of Foster’s archive, but there is very little evidence of how men attempted to model their lives after these prescriptions or of consequences when they did not, and this fact undermines Foster’s argument about the importance of men’s ability to control their desires.

Race mediates this perception as well. While white men of social standing may have suffered the moral judgment of a neighbor for committing adultery or incest, white servants and African Americans, both slave and free, likely suffered far more than moral scorn. As Foster notes, a slave named Cesar was indignant in defending his right to have consensual sex with a white woman in 1705. The court did not agree, and he was whipped twenty-five times. Men of African descent were far more likely to be convicted of sex-related crimes than white men. Block (2006, 146) has shown this for the entire eighteenth century. But the story of Cesar demonstrates that for men of African descent the struggle for sexual autonomy was framed by several dimensions. In the face of the charge of fathering a child with a white woman, Cesar claimed that he would do the same thing over again. His defiance of colonial legal authorities may signal affection for a woman and paternal investment in a child, a stubborn refusal to be cowed by white officialdom, or an attempt to access the sexual entitlement far more readily available to white men.

Historians of women and gender have increasingly turned their gaze to the function of gender, with less explicit attention to the lives of actual women. The previous discussion of male sexual desire, practices, and entitlement is a perfect example. This has had mixed consequences from the vantage point of feminism. On the one hand, study of the relationship between the sexes and the use, abuse, and distribution of power between

the two groups is exactly what feminist scholars such as Joan Kelly-Gadol (1976) and Adrienne Rich (1980) had in mind in the 1970s. On the other hand, some historians have argued that this work has gone too far, both in recentering the lives of men who have always been the main actors in history and in isolating the study of men's subjectivities from their social, economic, political, and sexual positions vis-à-vis women (Ditz 2004). And yet studies of men as gendered beings have offered important insights. Early work on masculinity by Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (1999), and Mark Kann, *A Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics* (1998), are excellent examples. Developments in the field of men's studies, however, have exacerbated the concerns of feminists whose decades of efforts led to the institutional space for gender studies in the first place. Ditz even suggests giving up on using gender as a theoretical category for writing about men, stating, "Faced with this dismaying prospect [scholarship that simply recenters men under the rubric of gender history], one is tempted simply to throw in the towel and stay within (or rejoin) the ranks of those continuing to do a theoretically informed, women-centered history on the grounds that it remains the most promising place for sustaining a feminist counterweight to this retrograde tendency" (2004, 8).

Some young scholars are masterfully bridging this gap between women's and gender history. Juliana Barr's excellent new book on the centrality of Native American gender roles and kinship values in shaping every level of interactions between a wide range of Indian tribes and Spanish and French settlers in the long eighteenth century is a wonderful remedy to Ditz's concerns. *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (2007) is a tour de force for three compelling, distinct reasons. First, and most significantly for this discussion, Barr manages a theoretically sophisticated analysis of gender and power while maintaining women as the central figures—if not the main actors—of the study. Barr convincingly shows the important roles women played within male-dominated political, economic, and diplomatic systems in spite of the fact that her archival sources privilege the perspectives and experiences of men. Second, Barr demonstrates that Indians held the upper hand in their relationship with both French and Spanish colonizers—and that, as a result, Native social, political, and economic structures that revolved around "gendered terms of kinship" (2) formed the basis for such interactions. This contests the view that differences in Native and European gender systems were sources of cross-cultural conflict that benefited European colonizers. This outlook, Barr contends, stems from a

decidedly European perspective on the interaction (8). Third, Barr avoids simply celebrating Native American culture for its arguably more favorable treatment of women and instead characterizes Indian women as she convinces us they really were: “sometimes pawns, sometimes agents” (247).

Women played an integral role as Europeans and Native Americans negotiated their relationships with each other. Marriage to a Native woman signaled a white man’s stability and trustworthiness by virtue of his entering her family’s kin system. The presence of women at the head of a group of Indian men signaled peace and desire for talks or trade. For these and other reasons, women became the primary targets of kidnapping and, later, diplomatic exchanges. Barr shows how the practice of wife stealing threatened to undermine a man’s status in the community. With his wife captured, a man was likely to lose not only “reputation, influence, and privileges” but his very home and the ability “to offer other men hospitality” (254). Barr’s (2007) portrayal of the impact of a kidnapping on other men’s perceptions of a husband relates to Foster’s (2006) insight on sexual assault in which the husband of the woman assaulted may feel that his honor and claim to his own manhood have been challenged by his wife’s assailant. Such a slight within Native communities holds obvious significant implications, as Native women played a valuable public role in diplomatic negotiations. English women in colonial Massachusetts were valued for their role in the domestic sphere, making incidents of attack or assault largely personal experiences for a woman or her family and less likely the spark of public or community outrage.

Social systems that explicitly barter women for economic and diplomatic purposes bring into relief the historical power not only of the traffic in women but also of the persistence of heterosexual marriage as a means of social order, political power, and economic privilege (see Rubin 1975; Rich 1980). This brings us back to Bennett and her question about the persistence of patriarchy and the importance of feminist historians’ attempts to unpack what makes patriarchy flourish in particular times and places. Is it possible to evaluate and compare the patriarchal authority of a man over his wife, who was raped in 1735 Massachusetts by their neighbor, with that of a Comanche man whose wife was stolen in 1770 by a Spanish colonist in an effort to gain a diplomatic advantage? Bennett asserts that we must attempt to make comparisons—even if they are impossible—in order to find ways to reinfuse meaning and weight into patriarchal oppression. Bennett points out that “Patriarchy might be everywhere, but it is not everywhere the same” and argues that there is still much for historians to interrogate around this power structure (54): “If we have the courage to make patriarchy—its mechanisms, its changes, its

forms, its endurance—a central problem of women’s history, we will write not only better history but also history that speaks more strongly to central feminist concerns” (54). Yet while the motive behind Bennett’s argument is compelling, I am not convinced that the outcome of such comparisons would not be yet another dead end. Studies of women and gender that seriously weigh the function of race, class, and culture, as is the case for most of the books discussed in this essay, actually demonstrate the very limits of patriarchy as a concept for critical historical inquiry. Recent developments in the historiography of Native Americans in the colonial period, for example, highlight the importance of careful consideration of gendered power in cross-cultural contexts, where patriarchy might not necessarily provide the common ground.

And yet in some instances, patriarchy persists. Newer studies find that shared masculine ideals between Native Americans and European colonizers facilitated their negotiations with each other, challenging earlier interpretations that distinct gender systems were the source of cross-cultural conflict and misunderstanding.⁶ Ann Little makes this argument most forcefully in *Abraham in Arms: War and Gender in Colonial New England* (2007), which examines over a century of conflict between Native Americans and English and French colonists. Little shows that attitudes toward gender roles and family structures were central to cross-cultural understandings and misunderstandings. The fact that English colonists and Native Americans shared basic patriarchal structures in which men exercised complete authority in matters of politics and war formed a basis of mutual understanding between the two groups. But other differences—and Little cites many—led each group to question and challenge the masculinity of the other. Little uses her sources well, citing documentation of taunts shouted or written to opposing warriors, which were an important, if somewhat performative, part of the ongoing military battles. Of particular significance was the practice of cultural cross-dressing in which Indians would dress in the clothing of Englishmen and Englishmen would don Indian apparel. The practice of cultural cross-dressing was not evenly practiced or equally significant, and Little could do more to emphasize this distinction. While Indians voluntarily donned English clothes for a wide variety of reasons—flaunting victory, showing submission, signaling desire to trade, or demonstrating diplomatic exchanges—Englishmen in her study only dressed in Indian attire out of exigency or to engage in

⁶ Brown writes of this gender frontier between English colonizers and Native Americans in *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996). See also Fischer (2002). Newer interpretations of the male alliance include Shoemaker (2004), Barr (2007), and Little (2007).

political theater, such as at the Boston Tea Party. Little is right to point out the gender transgression noted and experienced by Englishmen who were forced to get rid of traditional markers of their masculinity, most notably facial hair and pants. The gendered significance of the process by which Native Americans gained access to a specifically masculine power when donning the attire of Englishmen is less convincing in this context.

Though the topic is less central to her thesis than to Little's, Barr (2007) also suggests that military might was viewed by both Indians and Europeans as the marker of economic and political power (12). Barr shows that this developed slowly throughout the eighteenth century, as Spanish practices and tools became a central part of Native American warfare. In her study of warfare between Indians and English colonists in seventeenth-century New England, Little (2007) argues that their gendered social structures were more alike than different because both groups reserved the highest levels of political and economic authority for men. Barr sees more distinction between the Indians in her study and the Spanish colonizers, particularly among the Caddoan people. In the 1680s and 1690s, for example, "Matrilineal kinship defined the basic social unit of Caddo communities and also relations of production, trade, and diplomatic alliance. Marriage and kinship thus functioned as a 'metainstitution' that 'underpinned the organization of economics, politics, and religion' among Caddoan peoples" (Barr 2007, 67).

Women made important cross-cultural connections as well. In her study, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–1763*, Jane Merritt demonstrates the power of Moravian missionary women to convert Native American women and establish strong bonds with them in the process (2003). This relationship empowered both groups of women; Moravian women were more successful than Moravian men at converting Native Americans—especially women and children—to Christianity, and their efforts paved the way for smoother relationships between the two groups, while Native American women achieved a higher degree of spiritual authority in their communities through the ritualistic and emotional power of Moravian practices (103). Little (2007) offers some evidence of the ways that Native women were valued and exercised some authority within the social and familial system, but she concludes that Native men controlled the arenas that mattered. Patriarchy, Bennett (2006) might argue, remained intact.

Some of the most recent studies demonstrate the trend among historians of women and gender to see and unpack instances of historical continuity in addition to change. This practice is more challenging than it sounds, particularly given the fact that change over time is the funda-

mental framework for historical narrative. Bennett (2006) cites the importance of these developments, noting that key events in the traditional historical narrative such as political or economic revolutions are not necessarily accompanied by a dramatic change in women's roles or experiences. Bennett writes, "In most cases, the possibility that the status of women was not transformed is not even considered. We seem to assume that these turning points *must* have affected women's status, leaving to us the straightforward task of weighing the transformation" (63). The subdued conclusions of new works demonstrate this caution. This is particularly true for studies that explore the impact of the American Revolution on women's lives. Feminist scholars who fear that the history of the period of the nation's founding is the stuff of party politics and war stories will be pleasantly surprised by developments in the field. Those interested in literate female historical subjects with agency and politics to boot will enjoy the latest works by Mary Kelly and Rosemarie Zagarri. The causes and significance of the American Revolution are still hot topics in historical writings aimed at the general reading public. Work that centers the lives of women in this period promises to unpack a more nuanced view of roles and relationships between the sexes. Together, both Kelly's *Learning to Stand and Speak* (2006) and Zagarri's *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (2007) offer a more complete picture of the opportunities seized by the women of the era.

Kelly argues that the concept of civil society best encapsulates the range of public and political activities undertaken by middle- and upper-class predominantly white women in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Most of Kelly's book focuses on education as the central feature of women's advancement. Women used their access to reading, writing, and oratory skills to speak their minds, to engage in political discussions, and occasionally to challenge their subordinate position to men. The formal education of women, however, did not inspire a revolution of its own. Rather, it was more often a vehicle for middle- and upper-class families to consolidate their social standing (Kelly 2006, 21, 28).

Furthermore, Kelly notes—or concedes—domesticity, not reading or writing or discussion of important ideas, was the "signal force in the lives of these generations of women" (2006, 247). While disappointing to some who look for kindred spirits among intellectual women of the past, this argument is part of a trend in the field—the recognition that some moments of change or liberation still left women's position vis-à-vis men essentially the same. Kelly's findings speak to Bennett's formulation of the patriarchal equilibrium, the ways in which women's advancements are not ultimately threatening, partly because even with these achievements

women do not surpass in knowledge, power, or status their male contemporaries of similar race, class, and social standing.

Kelly argues that by the 1820s men showed genuine respect for women's intelligence (2006, 276). It is hard to believe that this respect crossed class or race lines—and Kelly does not argue that it did—but we do know that white men approved when women of their own class attended to their education for reasons ranging from republican motherhood to emerging ideas of companionate marriage. Literacy and writing also opened an avenue to greater personal fulfillment for such women, a point easily sold to those of us whose lives have been transformed by learning. Surely it was progress for women to have some careers open to them in education and publishing—allowing for a degree of economic independence for middle-class women—but there is little evidence they used such roles to challenge the social order. Some of the protagonists were visionary thinkers and activists of their day—Margaret Fuller and Lucy Stone among them—but they were exceptions (131–32). Finally, of great importance to those committed to unpacking differences among women and decentering the notion of an all-purpose patriarchy as a universal force is the fact that very few women of the era actually had access to the education enjoyed by these wealthy white women.

Zagarri's (2007) text looks more particularly at women's activism and agency in the political arena of this same era. Her work demonstrates Bennett's (2006) point that there is great value in feminists expanding their historical lens beyond the twentieth century when studying social movements and activists. While the post-1960s civil rights era has obvious value to contemporary activists and feminist scholars, a shortened historical view creates a false sense that social justice activism was born in the 1960s, perhaps with the exception of a few abolitionists and women's rights activists from the nineteenth century. Bennett attributes activists' discomfort with the long-ago past to the ambiguity of the subjects—and their politics. We know all too well that feminist activists of earlier eras often espoused racist, classist, and nativist tendencies of their own (Newman 1999). Coming to terms with them in all their dimensions makes history a crucial endeavor. We cannot appreciate their progressive thinking, however compromised and flawed it might seem to us, without understanding the conservative voices—what we might classify today as the poisonous environment—from which this progressivism emerged.

The women in Zagarri's study engaged in political maneuvering and activism in ways long thought beyond the reach of women. Just as Catherine Allgor did earlier in *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (2000), Zagarri takes

the important step of showing how women's experiences and actions were relevant to and even constitutive of formal political culture in the new republic. While many women's historians have argued that the American Revolution created opportunities for women in social, familial, and cultural spheres, Zagarri's women were actual political actors. Other studies have suggested this similar opening, but Zagarri demonstrates that it was a brief moment of agency that quickly closed by the Jacksonian period. The ending of women's widely accepted participation in formal political culture was triggered by the enfranchisement and political participation of a wider range of men and the growing belief that differences between men and women were biological rather than cultural. Zagarri presents a broad range of terms and uses of the phrase "women's rights" to include religious equality, educational access, and political rights (47). The concept of "female politicians" provides a category for women who were explicitly active in public discussions concerning parties, politics, and governing. With respect to women writers, public orators, and wives of politicians, the action and agency of such women is more convincingly framed in Zagarri's account than Kelly's. Of all these women, however, the influence of wives may be the most compelling. Allgor (2000) makes this point as well. Those women, Judith Sargent Murray among them, who dared not only to speak about the issues of the day but also explicitly challenged women's submission to men, were subject to all sorts of critiques. Perhaps most interesting is the warning issued by Murray's husband that "a female politician" such as herself was "an amphibious animal," which Zagarri interprets to mean neither male nor female (77).

While the phrase "female politician" is captivating, the evidence presented to substantiate its saliency is disappointing. The most compelling assertion is that women played a key role in the partisan political battles of the early republic. The turning point in women's access to the political realm was a result of such battles, as women were encouraged to withdraw from active political engagement and serve as peacemakers in their families. If it were not used by their contemporaries to describe some women, the term "female politician" would be very hard for the modern reader to accept, as our own conception of the term "politician" is so formal and particular, quite unrelated to the historical meaning cited here. Most provocative and convincing is Zagarri's assertion that the ideology of separate spheres is a direct reaction to what men perceived as women's overinvolvement in politics (2007, 135).

Zagarri's theory that women shifted from entitled politicians of the revolutionary era to apolitical humanitarian social reformers because men needed them not be political is fascinating. This concept shows that

women actually made a mark—a threatening one at that. It also shows that women were thought to be politically important and influential. Less clear is the evidence for Zagari's assertion that these women withdrew from politics and in effect stabilized both the family unit and the national political discourse. The absence of activity on the part of women during the Panic of 1819 does stand in juxtaposition to their ambitious involvements in previous national economic and military crises, but more evidence of their actual peacemaking activities and documentation that these activities were regarded as political by male politicians would make a more compelling case.

While the above-cited studies demonstrate an ever more nuanced approach to incorporating analysis of race, gender, and sexuality, most historians are at best unsure about how to address evidence of women who expressed love and affection for other women, or who rejected the conventional roles for women such as marriage, motherhood, and feminine dress. Bennett (2006) calls this the “lesbian problem” (108). While the erasure of evidence of same-sex love and intimacy from history is widespread and condemnable, just as problematic is the widespread failure by historians to consider the role that heterosexuality plays in giving meaning and stability to individual subjects as well as to social, political, legal, and economic institutions like the family, the household economy, the market economy, and the state's needs for able-bodied educated citizens. I call this problem heteroessentialism, an “ism” in that social, political, legal, and economic systems are rooted in and perpetuate heterosupremacy. Heteroessentialism results in the failure even to be able to see the work being done by these important institutions to support heterosexual desire, identity, and activity. Heterosexism, a term often used to levy this critique, does not fully capture the weight of the deployment of this value system and organizing principle, nor does it facilitate a thorough deconstruction of this phenomenon beyond the realms of sexual desire or behavior.

Most scholarship concerning sexuality in early America is marked by heteroessentialism, and the volumes under consideration here are not exceptions. Despite modeling a sophisticated analysis of sexual assault as a reflection of larger social and economic arrangements, Block (2006) does not apply the same rigor to unpacking the significance of sodomy or buggery charges. This is most notable in a case in which a woman accuses her husband of buggery. Block notes the legal distinctions between sexual practices deemed immoral and illegal in their own right—sodomy and buggery—and the crime of rape, which was harder to prove because it hinged on personal motive and blunt force, not simply a physical position. This distinction begs further examination and offers obvious con-

nections to contemporary queer theories that highlight the constitution of heterosexual sexual identity and “normalcy” in relation to that which is abject—the homosexual, the pervert. In the eighteenth-century case, the existence of “true” biblical and legal perversion in the form of buggery serves to justify and normalize sexual assault between men and women. Block attributes interest in studies of rape to its perversion of “the foundational act of heterosexual relationships” (11) and carefully unpacks the range of factors that give meaning to this transgression. Attempts to regulate sodomy and buggery, however, serve as important legal, moral, and cultural foils to sexual assault, and this point is also worthy of analysis.

Several works reviewed in this essay examine the range of ways that men exerted their social, economic, and political power over other men, and yet the possibility for sexual desire or exploitation among men is rarely even suggested. Some well-documented cases of sodomy and attempted sodomy charges between men serve to demonstrate the persistence of the practice of same-sex sex, both forced and consensual. Richard Godbeer (2002) has shown that class and social standing can serve to mediate both the legal consequences and social stigma faced by men engaging in sodomy. Although Lyons’s (2006) study concerns the analysis of “nonmarital sexuality” and “sexual intimacies outside marriage” (126), same-sex sex, love, and intimacies are neither examined nor suggested. Lyons is also the author of a thought-provoking (2003) essay on the homoerotic literature and cultures of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, so this absence is not for lack of evidence. Rather, historians still see those who desire and/or engage in same-sex sex as deviant, if not deviant in a moral sense (although this is certainly not a moot point), than deviant in a fact-collecting, trend-setting sense. Many historians claim that the fragmentary nature of their evidence concerning same-sex intimacies suggests that the subject was marginal to the period or to the topic of their study, giving them no reason to try to make meaning of it or to incorporate it into their work. This impasse, I must argue, is a personal rather than intellectual one. Queer theorists and feminist historians have modeled studies that demonstrate the ways that individual and group subjectivities are formed in relation—and sometimes in opposition—to others.⁷ Heteroessentialism prevents otherwise astute feminist scholars from raising questions regarding homosexual lives and heteronormative systems as they now nearly reflexively do about the function of race, gender, and class.

The brief critiques above serve not to single out particular scholars but to highlight common practices and limits within the entire field. As Ben-

⁷ See, e.g., Butler 1990; Smith-Rosenberg 1992; Ditz 1994; Brown 1996; Morgan 2004.

nett (2006) writes, “Most of us still see the past in heteronormative terms, closeting our thinking by failing to consider that the dead women we study might have been other than heterosexuals, other than wives, mothers, and lovers of men” (109). This applies to men as well. A reader of any one of these books would easily be convinced that powerful men delighted in exercising their authority, wealth, and power over lesser men. Why on earth would this pleasure or exertion not be extended to the sexual realm? In fact, this might be especially likely in the colonial period, when people did not yet consider sex or sexual things to be a uniquely authentic source of personal identity, closed off from others.⁸ Yet most scholars presume that historical actors are heterosexual, that sexual acts and desires are aimed at members of the opposite sex, and that the incidence of same-sex desire or intimacy has no bearing on the meaning of heterosexuality. The exercise of social power through sexual coercion between men would enable historians to problematize the cohesive stability of the female subject/victim conceptually and to highlight yet another dimension of the range of patriarchal authority exercised by some men.

While the study of sexuality in early America is the site of the most innovative and exciting work, it also reflects the philosophical and methodological limits of a culture and discipline structured by heteroessentialism. Despite this weakness—which plagues most contemporary scholarship—there is much to be hopeful about. A new collection edited by Foster, *Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (2007), brings together cutting-edge work in queer sexuality studies for the period and furthers the case for the significance of the study of same-sex sex and for a sustained critique of heteroessentialism. The current wave of feminist scholarship featured in this essay signals most dramatically that women’s experiences cannot be interpreted in isolation from their social locations shaped by race, class, geography, culture, and sexuality. A woman’s racial identity most significantly determined others’ perceptions, judgments, and attempts to regulate, abuse, or protect her as a sexual being. While this may not seem like a pathbreaking argument to scholars in the social sciences, anyone who has taken high school history can attest to the persistent whiteness of the universal subject in U.S. history—and the dire effect of this on our contemporary political discourse. To truly build and inspire a broad-based social movement to end sexist, racist oppression, we must teach the truth about the systems that perpetuate privilege and prejudice. By demonstrating the complexity of

⁸ Anne Myles makes a compelling case for this view in “Queering the Study of Early American Sexuality” (2003).

ways in which difference was codified and manipulated in early America, thereby stigmatizing and regulating some groups while normalizing and privileging others, all of these books help to make our view of the past more complex and more whole. The history of sexuality, a topic that still inspires discomfort reminiscent of adolescence in some scholarly circles, demonstrates most powerfully the significance of the intersection of race and gender in shaping dominant systems and cultural norms in U.S. history—and offers many important insights for those seeking to better understand, engage, and critique the deployment of ahistorical racist and sexist anecdotes in contemporary political discourse.

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