QUEER THEORY AND AMERICA’S REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS

By

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To my mother
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QUEER THEORY AND AMERICA’S REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS

By

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This dissertation examines the construction and experience of sexuality in
eighteenth century American literature, culture, and society. Focusing on the
Revolutionary War period, characterized by disruption, ambiguity, and disorder, I argue
that the era is a particularly productive site for locating and exploring genders and
sexualities in crisis. Departing from dominant historicist readings of early American
genders and sexualities, I use the tools of queer theory in order to bring to life the
oftentimes complex and multifaceted realms of subjectivity and life-making in past social
and cultural formations. In particular, I demonstrate how queering eighteenth century
American literature has the potential to unearth new sites of sexual knowledge,
intimately linked to affect, temporality, sensibility, and politics. Drawing upon a wide
range of literary forms, notably the sentimental novel, criminal confession, gothic novel,
and romance novella, I ultimately demonstrate how queer readings bear witness to a
transhistorical vision of gender and sexuality, blurring the past from the present, and
charting new terrain for the study of queerness in early America.
CHAPTER 1
WHAT DOES QUEER THEORY TEACH US ABOUT THE EARLY REPUBLIC?

In her 2004 revised and expanded edition of Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America, Cathy Davidson argues that The History of Constantius and Pulchera (1789-90), a peculiar romance novella about female cross-dressing and unrequited love, offers important insight into exploring alternative roles for women in eighteenth century America (273). Analyzing the novella through a gendered lens, Davison remarks that Pulchera, the title hero/heroine, can be read as a figure that resists the proscribed meanings of early American womanhood and virtue (271). As Linda Kerber notes, “‘virtue’...could be safely domesticated in eighteenth-century America; the mother, and not the masses, came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality” (16). Thus, Davidson builds a feminist critique of Constantius and Pulchera that situates the historical context in which the text was produced as the access point through which gender and sexuality is made legible and analyzable. Yet, Davidson notes that her argument about the novella, unchanged since the first publication of Revolution and the Word in 1986, would look radically different today in light of queer theory’s emergence in the academy. She states:

Were I to rewrite Revolution and the Word today[,]...I would...pay more attention to the subtle ways that female-ness is transformed...by sexuality. Cross-dressing novels such as Herman Mann’s The Female Review...or....The History of Constantius and Pulchera...become especially interesting in view of queer theory. Both books need to be read in light of excellent studies of female masculinity by scholars such as Judith Halberstam. (37)

Here, Davidson’s discussion reveals the central tension in early American sexuality studies. On the one hand, her historicist reading of the novella is still the dominant framework for approaching gender and sexuality in early American literature. On the
other hand, Davidson’s call to queer early American literature and to take up the critical anachronism of “female masculinity” serves as a competing and potentially incompatible mode to historicist methodologies and practices. Indeed, many early Americanists have echoed the call to queer early America, but few have fully heeded that call.¹

Davidson’s highly unanswered plea is enticing because it has left an open scholarly gap in early American sexuality studies—a gap this dissertation project seeks to fill in and amend. While Davidson limits her queer imagination to the tangible realms of gendered and erotic life, her commentary about Constantius and Pulchera is significant for two reasons. First, she is calling for alternative methodologies to approach the rich sexual histories of early America, reflected in and shaped by the vibrant literatures of the period. Second, Davidson centralizes the importance of gender and sexuality to the study of early American literature and culture. As such, my project takes as its mobilizing force the ambition of queering early America, and to extend Davidson’s call to imagine queerness as horizon or possibility, moving around and between analyses of gendered and sexual transgression. Queerness is not only made legible through its manifestation in bodily pleasures and drives, but through additional dimensions of personhood and experience.

My dissertation project, titled “Queer Theory and America’s Revolutionary Crisis,” argues that queerness exists within and around the multidimensional realms of life-making during the eighteenth century, particularly the era preceding and following the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), taking on multiple roles, permutations, and deployments as a sensibility, a style, a feeling, a political tool, and even a disruptor of time. I use literatures from the period as sites of theorization, possibility, and potential.
demonstrate the ways queer critique has the ability to reroute understandings of eighteenth century sexualities from cultural thematics linked to nationhood and belonging to considerations of the intangible realms of the intensely subjective, psychological, affective, and personal. The overarching goal of this project is to offer a theoretical model of early American sexualities, departing from prevailing historicist frameworks.

**Historicism and Unhistoricism**

Historicist methods dominate the study of early American sexualities and insist that we avoid reading sex and sexuality in anachronistic terms. Since “the past is fundamentally different from the present,” “imprecision…and ambiguity” must be avoided at all costs “in describing past sexual acts, behaviors, and desires” (Webster 378). For example, Thomas A. Foster’s 2007 edited collection, titled *Long before Stonewall*, includes a range of essays about same-sex sexuality in early America by prominent historicist scholars, including Caleb Crain, Richard Godbeer, and Clare A. Lyons.² Every essay in the collection begins with a central premise: Sexuality is social constructed and negotiated by the self in society. Yet, this premise does not adequately address the complexities of living in early (and emergent) modern culture. These essayists contextualize, through rigorous historical documentation and archival research, the ways sex and sexuality were experienced in a temporally-specific locale. They examine how same-sex sexuality in particular, not anachronistic homosexuality (a nineteenth century invention), functioned in terms of social, economic, and cultural standing.³ Historicists popularized a certain kind of methodology, “making power relations encoded into texts visible through the use of thick cultural description and an analysis of relationships between sexual practices and desires and textuality, language,
and representation” (Webster 378). For example, court records and other legal
documents about birthrates and sexual crimes are key access points for historicists to
know and understand sexuality in a specific and contingent manner. The goals of this
type of scholarship are to not only demonstrate that past and present conceptions of
sexuality are fundamentally different from one another, but to show that present sexual
norms and practices are not universal and natural across time and space.

David Halperin’s central claims about how to do the history of (homo)sexuality
and creating an alterist history have been especially influential to historicists in early
American sexuality studies. Drawing upon Foucault’s seminal work in The History of
Sexuality, Volume 1, Halperin forcefully argues that homosexuality was not only
“socially and culturally constituted in the modern period but also that the very division
between homosexuality and heterosexuality was the product of recent historical
developments” (How 10). For Halperin, the alterist model of history rejects trans-
historical identity categories, such as “lesbian” or “bisexual.” Echoing Halperin’s alterist
history, John D’Emilio challenges the myth of the “eternal homosexual” in his seminal
essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” For D’Emilio, “gay men and lesbians have not
always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a
specific historical era,” which he pinpoints as the moment of capitalism’s emergence
and the creation of a free-labor system (49). Indeed, D’Emilio’s argument is informed by
Halperin’s alterist model, which emphasizes historical difference and ideological
incompatibility. While both scholars do not reject the idea that same-sex sexual
practices have occurred throughout history, they forcefully claim that the social and
cultural meanings of those acts and the emergence of sexual identity can only be thought of in alterist as opposed to continuist terms.

A pertinent example of historicist methodology in practice is Heather Smyth’s analysis of cross-dressing in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799). For readers unfamiliar with the novel, the narrative sets up Dudley’s financial ruin due to the malicious and manipulative practices of Thomas Craig. Dudley flees to Philadelphia with his family where they are met with further tragedy. The plot soon focuses on Dudley’s daughter, Constantia, and her complicated web of passion, lust, desire, and power between the rakish Ormond, the libertine cross-dresser Martinette de Beauvais, and the sweet orphan Sophia Courtland. For Smyth, Brown’s depiction of cross-dressing in *Ormond* is significant only insofar as it sheds light on the historical and cultural context in which the text was produced. Smyth states:

> Brown wrote *Ormond* at a particular historical moment in post-Revolutionary America in which the social and political upsets of the Revolution had put into question strict divisions of gender and class. Changing American conceptions of women’s roles…frame Brown’s unconventional treatment of gender. (244-45)

Here, she reads the relationship between gender, sexuality, and cross-crossing in a context divorced from the present moment. For Smyth, there is no productive association or comparative link, for example, between cross-dressing and modern conceptualizations of drag. The gendered and sexual dynamics of eighteenth century cross-dressing can be made accessible only through historical and cultural specificity.

Another wave of scholarship emphasizes the limits of a strictly historicist (or alterist) methodology. In “Queering History,” a seminal manifesto for a queer theorization of premodern sex and sexuality, Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon demand a turn toward homohistory. Critiquing historicist methodologies and practices,
they explain that “historicism…proposes to know the definitive difference between the past and the present, [and] we venture that queering requires what we might call ‘unhistoricism’” (1609). “Unhistoricism,” according to Goldberg and Menon, is a form of queering because it rejects hegemonic views of history (1609). For them, “homohistory” is “invested in suspending determinate sexual and chronological differences while expanding the possibilities of the nonhetero,” which thus embraces continuity and anachronism (1609). By advocating for unhistoricist methods, Goldberg and Menon seek to bridge the divide between past and present in order to resist the impetus to categorize and harness sexuality. Important to note, they are not arguing that the past and the present are one in the same. In other words, they, like the alterists, are careful to distinguish themselves from self-proclaimed essentialists. Instead, Goldberg and Menon suggest that queering history “would suspend the assurance that the only modes of knowing the past are either those that regard the past as wholly different or those that can assimilate it to a present assumed identical to itself” (1616). Urging for a reconceptualization of “relations between past and present that would trace differential boundaries instead of being bound by and to any one age,” Goldberg and Menon provide a model of history that is characterized by a valorization of sameness and likeness (1616).

A pertinent example of proto-unhistoricist methodology in practice is Stephen Shapiro’s compelling argument about homoerotic desire in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* (1799). For readers unfamiliar with the novel, the narrative sets up the title character’s attempt to unravel the mysterious murder of his friend Waldegrave in Norwalk, Pennsylvania. Huntly’s chief suspect is Clithero, a sleep-walking Irish
immigrant. When Clithero is found to be innocent of the crime, Huntly continues to obsess—to the point of following/stalking—the idiosyncratic Irishman through Norwalk’s Gothic wilderness. Shapiro reads the scenes of Edgar’s hunt as integral moments of homoerotic expression. He analyzes Brown’s highly sensual geographical/topographical depictions during the chase, which he explains is part of the deployment of a metaphorical penetrative (anal) imaginary in the novel. Shapiro forcefully argues, “Brown’s…writing can verge on the semantic enunciation of a homoerotic community because the transition between two modes of preeminent discourse, the passage from reflexive to reproductive norms, creates a brief time-space for what may seem…modern” (224). However muted or restrained as homohistory, Shapiro nevertheless illustrates how the shift from homoerotic desire (sex) to “homoerotic community formation” (emergent sexuality) can be thought of on a continuum of modern likeness. Shapiro’s reading usefully situates the homoeroticism between Huntly and Clithero on a trajectory, where the past and the present are not fixed, stable or thoroughly incompatible with one another. The past and the present are thus imagined as sites of sexual knowledge in flux. Shapiro’s project usefully situates sexuality’s past as a space of discovery and innovation, which I seek to extend in terms of sexuality’s use and experience beyond, following his reading of *Edgar Huntly*, orifices and penetrative potentials, and toward other sites and modes of subjectivity and feeling.

I am partial to Menon and Goldberg’s project, although I find more common ground than they do between queer theory and historicism. For example, both share an interest in exploring the multiple forms of sexual desire and practice available to peoples in history. As Foucault elucidates, the eighteenth century witnessed “a multiplication of
discourses concerning sex...an institutional incitement to speak about it...a
determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to
cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (History
of Sexuality 18). Thus, although approached from different perspectives—from historical
contingency to historical continuum—the act of queering the eighteenth century is
primarily focused upon uncovering and analyzing the incongruent gendered and sexual
bodies, desires, and practices that fall outside of normative proscriptions of
reproduction, marriage, and the family. Central to these theorizations, then, is not only
an understanding of sexuality’s experience and expression as rooted in sexual intimacy,
but also the ways sexuality is linked to tastes, appetites, sensations, and affects. This
shared understanding and wider call for creative anachronism grounds and fuels my
project.

**Queer Horizons in Early American Studies**

This project begins by positioning queerness as an interpretive horizon or
possibility. If we follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s landmark articulation in *Tendencies*,
queer is “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances,
lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of
anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (8). I launch
my call for queer methodology by citing Sedgwick in order to illustrate several key points
about doing the history of early American sexualities. Sedgwick’s definition resists
detachment from a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender context. Since queerness is
always already relegated to the realm of nonexistence or obliteration through the tacit
operatives of heteronormativity, the very stake of its survival and intelligibility is
dependent upon a phenomenological association with same-sex object choice. While in
an eighteenth century context historicists wouldn’t deploy queer as a methodology for unearthing hidden homosexuals and their histories—which would enter into a hostile terrain of critical anachronism—Sedgwick’s terminology still incites meaning and use for both historicists and unhistoricists in its refusal to disidentity with sexuality’s experience and expression as rooted in the desiring body.

Motivated by early Americanists’ longing to recuperate the oftentimes idiosyncratic and ambiguous experiences of desire, dread, eroticism, and perhaps even forbidden friendship, I imagine this project as an exercise in “queer survival,” reclaiming, embracing, and remembering the histories and archives of the love(s) that dare not speak its/their name(s). For Sedgwick, queer survival is a “matter of surviving into threat, stigma, and…spiraling violence” (3). While Sedgwick is explicitly addressing tactics of refusal or defiance—the refusal to be bashed, the refusal to be eradicated by AIDS, and the refusal to render same-sex love an impossibility—we can effectively transition her theorizations to an eighteenth century contact zone. For early Americanists, my project asserts that queer survival is the critical practice of (re)reading the excesses, incongruites, and oddities of past sexualities, with an eye toward recovery, reconceptualization, and surprise.

Despite the generative ideas of Sedgwick, the dominant paradigms of queerness in practice and proliferation fail to take into account its multifaceted uses beyond a monolithic understanding of desire, pleasure, and the erotic, thus limiting the access points through which sexuality is made legible. If queer, as Sedgwick invokes it, should be thought of in universalizing rather than minoritizing terms, insofar as the former situates queerness on a trajectory of unbound influence, while the latter effects only
those who occupy a specific subject position, such as gay men or lesbians, then the
time has come to reorient the ways we do the history of sexuality in early America.
While dominant historicist models propagate truths about sexuality and knowledge,
unhistoricist models reread nonhetero bodies in un-historical similarity. In both models,
sexuality is made known through stagnant archives and approaches to the desiring
body. I seek to vigorously extend and reimagine these sites of knowledge production,
offering richer and more complex theorizations of sexuality in experience.

Thus, I call for radical reconceptualization of the juncture between early
American and queer, emphasizing the role of queer theory to enable transformative
criticism about early American sexualities. I seek to reframe early American sexualities
as processes of being and experience, rather than a historically specific marker of
proto-identity. As David Halperin notes in St. Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography:
“‘queer’ does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it
acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition
whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (62). Garnering
traction from Halperin’s definition as the disruption of normativity, “Queer Theory and
America’s Revolutionary Crisis” not to necessarily work to detach queerness from
sexuality—or rather, to detach queerness from same-sex object choice—but to illustrate
how it can serve as a critical tool or framework for examining the rich, fulfilling, and
oftentimes paradoxical elements of sexuality in experience, problematizing and
complicating simplistic correlative associations or links to sex, erotic impulse, or proto-
(thereby fixed) identity formation.
A small body of scholarship is doing the sort of work I am calling for. For example, in his recent article “Mary Rowlandson’s Hunger and the Historiography of Sexuality,” Jordan Alexander Stein offers us new directions for historicizing the intangible realms of sexuality, such as modes of feeling and sensibility. Stein’s theorizations are deeply indebted to the earlier queer interventions of Bruce Burgett, who claims that to “pin down the meaning and nature of [past] ‘sex’” and sexuality are never fully knowable. As such, we need to understand this dilemma not “as an epistemological or political failure, but as an opportunity to archive, write, and imagine queerer histories of sexuality, in both the past and the present tense,” taking up new sites of sex and sexuality’s nascent expression (Burgett 146). Heeding Burgett’s call, Stein argues that Rowlandson’s insatiable appetite and drive for sustenance during her traumatic trials of captivity and restoration can actually serve to expand “the repertoire of sexuality to include the cultivation of sensations, [making] it possible to connect sexuality with other phenomena…to which sexuality is generally considered to be unrelated” (469). Here, Stein makes an important intervention for interrogating how we do the history of sexuality in early America. This is an especially profound and timely intercession considering that dominant historiographical models propagate Puritan sexuality as incompatible with the Calvinist worldview, perpetuating Foucault’s “acts versus identities” argument. For Stein, sexuality’s burgeoning and polygonal manifestation can be located around and between the sodomitical archives, and toward surprising sites of feeling, sensation, and experience. Actively engaging with queer theory, Stein uncovers early or pre-modern sexuality in spaces outside of the boudoir, illustrating its capacity to cross terrains of being and becoming.
In addition to Stein’s contributions to the study of early American sexualities, foundational work by Michael Warner, and more recent scholarship by Christopher Looby, Stephen Shapiro, and Greta LaFleur is more amenable to the methodology that I favor. These scholars queer the early American archive, from Charles Brockden Brown’s literary corpus—such as *Ormond* (1799) to *The Memoirs of Stephen Calvert* (1799-1800) and finally to *Edgar Huntly* (1799)—to Herman Mann’s *The Female Review* (1797) by focusing on the deployment of the language of sexuality in these texts, examining articulations or utterances of desire, pleasure, and erotic longing. Warner, Looby, Shapiro, and LaFleur, among others, have been instrumental voices for carving out new and innovative interpretations of early American literature, centralizing gender and sexuality as integral aspects of the early republic’s print culture. In doing so, these scholars have demonstrated the power and potentials of these narratives to challenge, resist, and possibly even usurp and transform ideologies of dominance, erasure, and subjugation.

Garnering traction from Stein and other present voices in the field, I argue that the eighteenth century is a productive site for locating queerness in subversive acts, performances, and negotiations of being and becoming American and its culturally laden inscriptions or meanings. Arguing queer as a mode of survival, I imagine the very practices of its survival—forcefully articulated as resistance, refusal, and combative critique—as strategies for enabling or enticing possibility. By possibility, I am arguing that queer tactics of survival do not need to publically make themselves legible through physicality, spectacle, and defiance, but through the spectral and intangible experiences of selfhood. By queering eighteenth century affects, aesthetics, styles, times, and
sensibilities, this project helps us comprehend sexuality’s ability to bridge—or perhaps breach—social formation and nationhood to emergent realms of political and cultural transformation.

The Revolutionary War and Eighteenth Century Sexuality

Before offering a chapter outline of my project, I need to step back and explain why I want to focus on this era—the decades before and after the Revolution—in particular and why this era serves as a productive and compelling site for queer theorization. As Foucault himself hypothesizes, the eighteenth century saw a shift in the way sex was conceived—it moved beyond moralism and judgment and toward a process of administration (24). With the rise of emergent capitalism and industrialization, in addition to an increased pressure to police sex, governments—within a Western context—saw:

[T]he emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population placed between its own growth and the resources it commanded...At the heart of this economic and political population was sex: it was necessary to analyze the birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations...[and] the effects of unmarried life. (Foucault 26)

Although Foucault is addressing sex’s deployment through a European configuration, his claims appear especially pertinent and pressing considering the literature preceding and following the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), a period characterized by a crisis of locating or harnessing American-ness outside of British-ness in order to garner and mobilize support for the war and the subsequent evolving national project. As J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur famously asked in Letters from an American Farmer (1782): “What is an American?” On the one hand, Crèvecoeur would answer his own question in terms of the environment and the organic growth of the new country. On the other hand,
the question becomes more complex when we consider the fracturing of identity that occurred during the American Child’s break from the British Parent in the aftermath of the Revolution. In a historical moment felt through experiences of shattering, displacement, disavowal, and renewal, we can imagine how the period’s literature serves as a productive site for locating transgression, subversion, and possibly even resistance during the eighteenth century.

Gordon Wood and Joyce Appleby offer a useful framework for articulating the tensions and defining character of the Revolutionary War and the early republic. In The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787, for example, Wood traces the transformation of American politics from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the final version of the American Constitution, produced in 1787. His political history is beneficial for illustrating the construction of normative citizenship and the bodies that matter during the republic’s formative years. In addition, his work is important for conveying the paradoxical espousal of freedom and liberty for all in republican rhetoric, including (but not limited to) the disenfranchisement of women and the slave trade industry. I draw extensively from his book project in order to demonstrate how republicanism defined the parameters of citizenship around a hegemonic construction of prosperous white manhood.

Wood’s political history is central for understanding the bodies that did and didn’t matter in republican thought and policy. He notes that classical republicanism pervaded America’s political landscape throughout the eighteenth century. This political tradition, which emphasized a strict partitioning between social order and hierarchy, found its origins in a dominant facet of British political thought that made a clear and distinct
division between nobility and the common people. As a reaction against this political form, a radical Whig tradition took root in the late 1770s and early 1780s, which forcefully championed direct democracy and constitution-building on the state level. Fearing democracy in excess, a conservative Federalist tradition took shape in the early republic, which supported a balance of powers and emphasized the centrality of the Constitution’s guiding principles for national unification. Federalists took up this political stance and ideology in order to circumvent the possibility of underqualified “new men” from attaining positions of power. They wanted to protect the rights of the minority from majority rule. However, “minority” in this case indicates wealthy property and land-owning white men. As such, the rhetoric of republican citizenship and American freedom ironically championed democracy, while obscured the realities of social division and inequality. Thus, citizenship was inextricably linked to prerequisites of racial, gendered, and class being and status (Wood 46-90).

One of the foremost traits of the era was its obsession with the rhetorics of virtue and corruption. Civic virtue was inextricably linked to American political formation because the concept of a republic itself rested on the cultivation of proper citizenry habits, beliefs, and interests in fear of an authoritarian coup d'état. As Gregory S. Alexander notes, “Political writing was preoccupied with the…sources of corruption…and the necessary social, economic, and political conditions for virtue to thrive…[C]ivic republican ideology posited that virtue…required [certain] social conditions” (30). In creating a civic republican discourse, the Founding Fathers crafted character dichotomies in order to instantiate their national vision and to demarcate good subjects from bad ones. Some of these demarcations included: “Equality vs. privilege,
Leisure vs. luxury, Independence vs. servility, [and] Liberty vs. wealth” (Alexander 30). Hence, the Constitution, following Wood’s historical mapping, can be imagined as (emergent) liberal society’s embodied social and moral code. If we return back to Foucault’s historicist reading of eighteenth century sexuality, then, we can imagine how the mechanisms or dispositifs of power—administered and permeated through the didactic operatives of the sentimental novel, political writings, and other literary forms—worked to offset and rectify the chaos of a broken social body, usurping regimes of colonial repression for liberation, freedom, and virtuous purity (or as the story goes). America is hailed into being as the modern nation state as it is destroyed and reborn. In its ashes, the ghosts of witches, bestial bodies, whoremongers, and wenches disintegrate (vice), and they are replaced by new arrangements and categorizations of gender and sexual experience (supposed virtue). With the rise of the modern nation-state and its need for codification, systemization, and arrangement, sex is politics, sex is economics, and sex is public. In short, the early republic sought to compel a new nation to organize itself around heteronormative principles (Wood 91-124).

Literary scholars have taught us that this push for order was not without it undercurrents and countermovements. Central to the study of the new nation’s literatures is a thematic emphasis on national belonging and social bodies in crisis that are marked by their Otherness. In *The Plight of Feeling*, for example, Julia Stern claims that “in the face of the overwhelming hate, anger, fear, and grief that grip the nation in the 1790s, the sensational novelistic practices of the era constitute a form of psychic realism” (6). Reading early American novels, such as Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), through the political ideology of Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques
Rousseau, among others, Stern argues that the early U.S. novel is best understood as a space of crisis, melancholically reflecting upon the power and limits of sympathy—or the attempt to feel the feelings of others to unite the nation—in a culture of increasingly self-motivated interest, fueled by capitalism’s imminent emergence. Thus, she reads the early American novel as a form of elegy or mourning, arguing that “the Founding [of America is] not a…celebration of the birth of the nation but…a funeral rite,” where the novel laments the loss “the nation’s noncitizens,” such as “women, the poor, Native Americans, and aliens,” who “lie socially dead and inadequately buried, the causalities of post-Revolutionary political foreclosure” (2). Her project works to recover those “noncitizens,” which eighteenth century political thought seeks to hide, make invisible, and eradicate.¹²

Stern’s interrogation of the tenuous self and the Other in early U.S. fiction is further exacerbated when we consider the republican rhetoric surrounding the American body politic. The convergence of republican language about the new nation and its inheritors and sentimental rhetoric, which was a philosophical and cultural movement that valorized feeling over rationality, provided the means through which the Founding Fathers created a vision of an inclusive body politic between (white) men. This vision took up the rhetoric of fundamental likeness in order to demonstrate its ability to forge benevolent social relations that would create the conditions for national unification and citizenry (Saillant 304). For the powers of the State, republicanism codified the promise of freedom in post-revolutionary America (Saillant 304). This conception of freedom, as Eric Foner notes, valorized participation in the public sphere,¹³ while also maintained that individual rights would be protected against governmental intrusion (7).
Paradoxically, republican freedom and liberty "had an exclusive, class [gender and race]-based dimension, in its assumption that only property-owning citizens…possessed virtue," which was not only imagined as a “personal, moral quality,” but also a drive and readiness to “subordinate private passions and desires to the public good” (Foner 7-8). 14 As such, “the emphasis on property as the essential requisite for the independence that was required of a virtuous citizen led…to the belief that…wealth was conducive to nurturing a superior class of citizens,” while relegating its Others, such as slaves, outside the American body politic (Beeman 19). Drawing upon Roman and European thought models, particularly Montesquieu’s “spirit of the law” and Adam Smith’s theorization of “moral sentiment,” the Founding Fathers firmly harnessed the spirit and feeling of post-war vigor within a (contained) rhetoric and policy of social inclusion/exclusion.

Those morally and virtuously uncouth beings, branded by racial, economic, gender, and sexual unintelligibility, were thus configured as threats or disrupters to the American body politic. As Montesquieu warns in The Spirit of the Laws (1748), for example:

Let us assume for a moment that the fickleness of spirit and indiscretions of our women, what pleases and displeases them, their passions, both great and small, were transferred to a Eastern government along with the activity and liberty they have among us: what father of a family could be tranquil for a moment? Suspects everywhere, enemies everywhere; the state would be shaken, one would see rivers of blood flowing. (270)

For Montesquieu, the pleasures and passions of women need restraint in this new form of Western political economy. Since there are “enemies everywhere,” unsettling the social projects of the Father and his Family on their city upon a hill, the social body’s self is necessitated through the production of an Other in order to define itself and its
boundaries or limits. For our Fathers, this project entailed a clear partitioning between
the social whole and its dissenters. Those outside the spirit of American republicanism
were thus subject to enslavement or expulsion.\textsuperscript{15} The perpetual cycle of colonization
had garnered momentous force, and the drive toward American exceptionalism was
beginning to be cast in sight.

For eighteenth century republicans, sexuality was firmly implicated in their social
project. As political knowledge formation is instantiated through the manufacturing and
dissemination of ideas and values about civic society, republican sexuality became a
way of being. Rigid conceptions of marriage, courtship, monogamy, and chastity fused
and amalgamated in the name of Nation.\textsuperscript{16} In brief, civic society’s ability to sustain
freedom was imagined as a process of linking the civic to virtue. In the name of unified
goodness or benevolence, as Richard Godbeer notes, “postrevolutionary writers argued
that private and public virtue were closely intertwined: the former sustained the latter”
(295). Heeding the warning of Montesquieu, America’s Fathers championed the (white)
woman’s (mother’s) ability to deflect the advances of moral corruption, coded as State
concern behind the veil of power, and to safeguard and uphold the national project by
championing virtue in all spheres of being and travel.\textsuperscript{17}

Because sexuality studies has largely concerned itself with how “virtue” was
codified in sentimental novels and other literary forms, linking sexuality to broader
national thematics, we have overlooked many directions for queering the early republic
and the psychology and subjectivity of its peoples. If, as historicists have argued,
following the aforementioned work of Gordon Wood and Gregory S. Alexander,
republicanism’s emergence signaled a new imagination of belonging and exclusion,
public versus private, freedom versus liberty, and crisis versus stabilization, to name a few binaries, then that very space of the intangible, tied to modes and experiences of sexuality, serve as an invitation for queer theorization, which I use here to indicate possibility or horizon. When we move to other realms of the sexed body’s utterances—latent exclamations—as a body politic in itself is metaphorical—we can begin to fully explore, explain, and imagine the wider potentials or effects of queerness in practice and proliferation. If republicanism ushers in normativity, queering the early American archive, which (as I stated earlier) does not need to take up same-sex object choice as its point of totalizing intelligibility, can serve to disrupt the national project and its attempts to restructure a broken social body in the wake of revolution.

**Queer Theory: Looking Backward to Move Forward**

Queer theory in the 1990s, pioneered by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and David Halperin, among others, sought to build off of and depart from LGBT studies and feminist thought, analyzing the social construction of gender, sexuality, and identity politics and rejecting fundamental truths about these terms. Ushered in with Butler’s concept of performativity, early queer theorists vigorously attempted to disrupt and challenge the sex/gender binary system and conceptions of normativity and essentialism, recasting the role of queer to a mode of fluidity and indeterminism. More recently, queer scholarship on affect, kinship, nation, and historiography helps us to expand the potentials and uses of queerness toward goals of social, cultural, and political transformation.

While I resist unhistoricist practices that relish in anachronistic and idiosyncratic uses of homohistory, I find the language of contemporary queer theory useful for conceiving, imagining, and apprehending eighteenth century literature and its power to
affect—particularly work by Sara Ahmed, Heather Love, Roderick Ferguson, Elizabeth Freeman, among many others. This is because queer theory enables alternative forms of language and understanding to flourish. In a project that is about the intangible, fluid, and shape-shifting aspects of sexuality and selfhood, I find this methodology useful for my dissertation’s goals and interventions. For example, I find Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* compelling because it provides useful directions for approaching the complex relationship between subject formation, affect, and citizenship. In addition, Ahmed provides important interventions about moral and political philosophies of happiness, which can be extended to an eighteenth century American contact zone. On similar times, Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black* rejects liberal pluralist and revolutionary nationalist thought in defining queer of color analysis. By reformulating Ferguson’s thought in an eighteenth century context, we can reconceptualize and rework conceptions of black subject formation, slave society relations, and emergent capitalist practices.

My second reason for drawing upon these recent works has do with the focus on contemporary times and archives in queer criticism. The vigor and motivation of doing queer work has been obscured by what I term the postmodern turn and privilege and its host of queer vestiges, from snap! queens to butch bottoms. In developing this introduction, I went back and revisited Eve Sedgwick’s body of work, specifically *Between Men*, *Epistemology of the Closet*, and *Tendencies*. As Michael Warner recently remarked about Sedgwick’s introduction to *Tendencies*, titled “Queer and Now”: “I am reminded of the potent sense of possibility opened up 20 years ago by the idea of queer theory. The sense of a historical moment is strong in the essay, as its title
underscores” (“Queer and Then?”). Warner’s comment, while at once meditative and nostalgic, is significant for its turn backward. For Sedgwick, queer as prospect, excitement, and innovation is grounded in the pleasure she takes from perverse reading practices. From “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” to “The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic,” Sedgwick smuggles, reads, and over-reads the past in order to make legible the diverse semblances of queerness across time and space, dusting off those cobwebs that (appear to) cover the closet (Tendencies 3). Thus, when Warner writes that “[t]he sense of a historical moment is strong” in Sedgwick’s introduction, we can playfully extend his observation to include her anticipated exhilaration at undoing history and reclaiming its queer ghosts.

Indeed, despite Sedgwick’s primary focus on the Victorian era (in her earliest works), queer theory has a decidedly presentist bent—with one exception. When surveying the works published by Duke University Press’s Series Q before its conclusion in 2012, I observed that the majority of texts published were either preoccupied with Shakespeare’s England and the early modern period or twentieth century America (although we do see some attention paid to the nineteenth century). The specter of the eighteenth century and its excesses, popularly imagined through decadent displays of fashion and flair, from those full-bottomed wigs, mantuas to linen underdrawers, are decidedly left silent, cast aside, and unremarked. From Lee Edelman’s No Future, which calls for the rejection of the social order and an embrace of the death drive to Ann Cvetkovich’s An Archive of Feelings, which presents a theory of twentieth-century queer trauma, and finally to Kathryn Bond Stockton’s The Queer Child, which explores children’s sexualities in contemporary literature, film, and theory, and back, queer and
now marks its immediacy in the present for imagining the future. For these scholars, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are the Truths of queerness in practice and proliferation. Whether these theorists are looking forward, backward, or in the case of Stockton, sideways, the present is situated as emblematic and embodied queerness. In the process, the past is relegated to the margins, only permitting those classics of True literary significance to speak, subverted for contemporary culture and society’s instability and (seemingly) unyielding productivity.

The understanding of the privileged contemporary has been recognized by a select circle of queer theorists. In her book *Queer/Early/Modern*—a Series Q publication—Carla Freccero, drawing upon poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, argues for queer theory’s turn toward “the problem of time and rhetorical subjectivity” (2). For Freccero, queering temporality is integral for imagining how the past, present, and future are sequentially fragmented and obscured, shaping the ways we understand history, literature, and culture. She argues that queer (for early modern scholars) should be thought of as a sign of indeterminacy, as opposed to proto or precipitated identity construction/formation. For Freccero, this recast definition offers a productive model for creating or unearthing alternative reading practices or methodologies. She forcefully grounds her theorizations in a process she refers to as “fantasmatic historiography.” As Freccero elucidates, “fantasmatic historiography” recognizes “what Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Slavoj Žižek observe to the mode through which subjects live not only their histories, but ‘history’ itself, to the extent that history is lived as and through fantasy in the form of ideology” (4). In this light, “fantasmatic historiography” can be imagined as history’s imaginary, insofar as the past’s effects carry on in the present. These effects,
which have the power to affect, also have the ability to transform queerness from a way of live to markers of experience in continuum.

Echoing Freccero’s call, Heather Love has staked out her own position on historiography through the affective turn in queer studies. In her book Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History, Love problematizes what I would liberally refer to as homonormativity and the regularizing impulses of contemporary LGBTQ social movements. For Love, queer activism today takes up the rhetoric of forwardness, progress, and normality, and in the process obscures or subverts the memory of the (haunting) past for a vision of the future that rests on assimilationist politics. Yet, the project of feeling backward seeks to recover those feelings, oftentimes difficult to locate or make legible, that haunt the queer past through abject and excessive and uncomfortable displays of mourning and melancholia. Since, as Love notes, “same-sex desire is not as impossible as it used to be,” “the survival of feelings such as shame, isolation, and self-hatred into the post-Stonewall era is often the occasion for further feelings of shame” (4). As a result, she finds it imperative to critically reconsider and engage with the depressing past, reassessing the risks of disavowing queer history, and arguing for a recuperation of those dark feelings that linger in the archives. For Love, looking or turning backward is a way of understanding how history’s affects remain significant and poignant in the present. While Love is specifically interested in early twentieth century modernisms and articulations of same-sex desire, her theories appear especially useful to my dissertation project in that they address the vitality of history’s lasting endurance, moving around and between
dimensions or paradigms of erotic life and toward other sites of sexuality’s manifestation and expression.

From Freccero’s queer time to Love’s queer feeling, the moment has come to focus the spotlight on what queer theory can do for the highly unauthorized terrain of the early republic and its literatures. To recapitulate, “Queer Theory and America’s Revolutionary Crisis” does not seek to replicate, reproduce, or reclaim identities in disturbance, but to actively engage in a critically queer project that is, following Laura Doan’s scholarship, “uninterested in recuperating and/or tracing queerness-as-being but eager nevertheless to…[authorize] queerness-as-method” (viii–ix). For Doan, queer history is still preoccupied with the Normal and its others, and in the process replicates the homo/hetero binary. Within this conceptual framework, Doan problematizes the privileged queer present, which situates the past as subordinate to postmodernity’s lasting endurance (power).

Following Doan’s critique, I want to argue, on the most fundamental level, that the turn backward can inform and transform queer criticism. If we imagine the queer past as a site of unknowability, as opposed to a site of anticipated or precipitated knowability, we can begin to discover new articulations and modes of queerness across time and space (Doan 4). As such, I want to situate queer critique as a process of uncovering and surprise that resists anachronism in its reveal. In his recent article “New Approaches to the Queer 18th Century,” Chris Roulston echoes these concerns: “The challenge of queer critical history is to ask whether it is possible for the past to tell us something that we don’t already know. Can we be open to the past as the realm of the new, rather than, for example, a realm of familiar binaries?” (763). Here, Roulston’s
provocative question works to challenge or unearth the heteronormative narrative or worldview propagated in eighteenth century social, intellectual, and political thought. Indeed, the queer past can be imagined as an “ongoing testing…ground[s]” of conventionality in crisis, whereby the “past pushes limits, [and] it speaks of the beyond and of the ‘what if’” (Roulston 769). Thus, this dissertation project works to mobilize the eighteenth century queer past as a space outside of containment, homogeneity, and stagnancy. Bringing Roulston’s ideas to bear on this dissertation project, I foresee each chapter as a moving image of possibility and potential.

Mapping the Queer Project: Chapter Overview

Each chapter of this dissertation works to reconceptualize and reorient the ways we do eighteenth century sexualities. This dissertation poses and works through conceptually uncharted terrain, using the tools of queer studies to interrogate and theorize eighteenth century interpersonal and subjective imaginings of nationhood, affect, and aesthetics, to name a few, that inform and map sexuality’s expression and experience. The goal for each chapter, as previously stated, is to create a moving image or picture of sexuality’s psychology and mode of being, and to illustrate how queer theories, situated as seemingly incompatible with earlier American literature, can work to unearth emergent newness and transform the borders of a republican body politic. As such, this introduction playfully appropriates its title from a 1995 PMLA guest column by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner titled “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” While Berlant and Warner are working to articulate the uses, deployments, and limitations of “queer commentary,” I find their project especially compatible with mine because they, too, are exploring uncharted territory (344). Similar to the ways Berlant and Warner are articulating and defending a budding academic
discipline, my hope is that the chapters that follow offer new theoretical models, directions, and insights for approaching eighteenth century sexualities. Building upon the theoretical scholarship I’ve outlined, I seek to address and work through the complexities of queering the early republic and its letters, establishing a methodology and framework for uses of queer critique in history.

The works I’ve selected for my chapters present a comprehensive depiction of the nascent literary landscape of the early republic, focusing on both fiction and nonfiction. I tactfully chose a delicate balance of canonical and non-canonical texts to theorize. Since the study of early American literature is still combatting the academy’s dismissal of the period as juvenile, embryonic, or inferiorly imitative literary production, I strive to recuperate several works that have been cast outside of the canon and denied reprinting, most notably *The History of Constantius and Pulchera* (1789-90) and *The Life, and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man* (1768). I offer a counterpoint to these lesser-known works by devoting two chapters to canonical novels, specifically Hannah W. Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* (1799), in order to take head on the difficult task of queering eighteenth century literature outside of a historicist framework. In addition, these texts represent a moving image of my theoretical concerns, specifically as they respond to issues of nation, affect, temporality, and aestheticism.

Chapter 2, titled “The Pursuit of Unhappiness: Queer Melancholy in Hannah W. Foster’s *The Coquette*,” rereads didacticism and sentiment in the epistolary novel. While dominant literary-historicist approaches argue that Foster’s novel creates a proper cult of feeling for the young national body, I argue that Foster’s novel counter-discursively
relishes in wrong feeling. I work to chart out Eliza’s (the novel’s protagonist) spectrum of feeling in order to demonstrate the ways she embraces what I term “queer melancholy.” Drawing upon Sara Ahmed’s recent work in *The Promise of Happiness*, I define queer melancholy as “placing…happiness in the wrong object[s],” taking pleasure in the unpleasurable (Ahmed 155). I use this framework to demonstrate how perverse, sad feeling fuels sentiment in *The Coquette*. The overarching goal of this chapter is to challenge the scholarly assumption that the sentimental novel domesticates women and their feelings. In its place, I redirect the didactic impulse for queer affect.

Chapter 3, titled “*The History of Constantius and Pulchera: Camp, Parody, Politics,*” investigates the title novella about cross-dressing as a parody of republicanism. Using the text as my site of theorization, I propose a model of camp aestheticism in early America. Departing from current scholarship that reads Revolutionary cross-dressing as part of a larger radical turn, I argue that *The History* creates a cult of ridiculousness, embracing the excessive, exaggerated, and unapologetically humorous. I take up the text’s use of parody and pleasure to argue that early American camp is part of a larger continuum of queer culture making and aestheticism.

Chapter 4, titled “Queer of Color Critique and Arthur’s Criminal Confession,” seeks to explore the possibility of a queer of color subject in eighteenth century American print culture, offering a conceptual turn in early American and African-American studies for approaching queer resistance and disruption to the evolving national project. Examining the *Life, and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man* (1768), an important criminal life narrative about black sexuality and property relations in pre-
Revolutionary War America, I work toward producing a theory of the eighteenth century queer of color subject who assumes a subjectivity and agency through paradoxical criminality and life-through-death in print. Drawing upon Ferguson’s influential work in *Aberrations in Black* about race, economics, and sexuality, I ultimately demonstrate how Arthur stands outside of black history, using the medium of the criminal confession to rupture the hegemony of the American body politic.

Finally, Chapter 5, titled “Queer Time and Indigenous Space in *Edgar Huntly*,” seeks to redirect scholarly attention from the latent homoerotics between Huntly and Clithero (the novel’s two leading characters) and toward the intermediate figure of Old Deb, a seemingly minor character who appears during the Indian attacks toward the latter half of the novel. I argue that she is both an insider and an outsider to not only America, but also to the tribe which signals her belonging. Taking up recent scholarship on queer temporality, I argue that Old Deb is a figure in a queer space and time, operating as figure caught in-between history. Left alone in her hut with her non-human companions, Old Deb symbolically embodies the power and premise of this project—to illustrate queerness in continuum. Thus, this chapter puts queer theory in conversation with *Edgar Huntly* in order to reread history and its queer discontents. Indeed, queer theory is not passé nor is it dead. It garners its motivation forward by reclaiming its past. Queer theory is thinking backward in order to move forward, while (at times) bent in its generative turn.21

Notes

1 See, for example, Anne G. Myles’s “Queering the Study of Early American Sexuality.” Drawing upon Foucault, Myles argues that queer theory has the potential to unearth emergent discourses about early American sexualities and sexual practices. Furthermore, she explains that the tools of queer theory enable a reconsideration of how colonial power and nation building are legitimized and instantiated.
through the production of a discursively situated Other, which she uses as an umbrella term for gender and sexual transgressors (200).

2 Other important historicist works about early American sexualities include Merrill D. Smith’s edited collection *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, John D’Emilo and Estelle Freedman’s *Intimate Matters*, Richard Godbeer’s *Sexual Revolution in Early America* and *The Overflowing of Friendship*, Thomas A. Foster’s *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man*, Clare A. Lyons’s *Sex among the Rabble*, and Sharon Block’s *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*. Integral documentary history anthologies about early American sexualities include Elizabeth Reis’s edited collection *American Sexual Histories*, now in its second edition, and Kathy Peiss’s edited collection *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*.

3 See, for example, Richard Godbeer’s essay “The Cry of Sodom: Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England” in the collection. Godbeer asserts that Puritans viewed sodomy on their own terms, emphasizing “practical issues rather than moral absolutes” (84). Through his analysis of Nicholas Sension’s sodomy trial and subsequent acquittal, Godbeer illustrates that Sension’s same-sex sexual behaviors were tolerated because of his powerful economic and social status.

4 Yet, Halperin also problematizes this claim by acknowledging and working through the risks of hailing modern homosexuality as monolithic and uniform, instead of, to use Eve Sedgwick’s language, “overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual” in its definition and usage (*Epistemology* 45).

5 The ‘acts versus identity’ argument is problematized in David Halperin’s seminal piece “Is There a History of Sexuality?” For Halperin, Foucault’s understanding of sexuality as a “uniquely modern production” (258) fails to take into account how ancient and pre-modern social formations negotiated sexuality’s meaning across “spheres of existence” (259). For Halperin, earlier societies and their cultural practices offer keen insight into exploring and explaining the relationship between sex and status, sex and citizenship, and sex and power (260-61).

6 See, for example, “New English Sodom.”

7 See, for example, Christopher Looby’s “The Literariness of Sexuality,” Stephen Shapiro’s “In a French Position,” and Greta LaFleur’s “Precipitous Sensations.”

8 As Susan Imbarrato notes, the construction of a distinctly American character coincided with larger debates over the de-royalization of British North America and the movement toward independence. She observes that the late eighteenth century witnessed a turn toward American subject formation, which propagated the belief that “if an individual can transcend restrictions determined by birth…by engaging in self-construction, a colony can overcome political oppression by asserting its own” freedom (12).

9 I also find Appleby’s book *Inheriting the Revolution* particularly useful for historicizing the early republic’s national character. In her text, Appleby presents a montage of autobiographical accounts of Americans born between 1776 and 1800. Tracing life histories in the aftermath of the Revolution, she provides a poignant account of the emergence of American liberal ideology, Federalist cause, and their paradoxes. Appleby usefully presents the contradictory ideology of American freedom, nationhood, and belonging.

10 For further scholarship on republicanism and early American political thought, see Bernard Bailyn’s *The Origins of American Politics*, Patricia U. Bonomi’s *The Lord Cornbury Scandal*, Richard L. Bushman’s *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts*, Paul Downes’s *Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature*, Isaac Kramnick’s *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*, Ed White’s *The Backcountry and the City*, and Gordon Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.

11 See, for example, Michael Warner’s *The Letters of the Republic*, Bruce Burgett’s *Sentimental Bodies*, Philip F. Gura’s *Truth’s Ragged Edge*, Elizabeth Barnes’s *States of Sympathy*, and Stephen Shapiro’s *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel*. 
See also Elizabeth Barnes’s *States of Sympathy*. In her chapter “Natural and National Unions,” for example, Barnes explores the puzzling pervasiveness of incest in early U.S. fiction, most notably William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789). Barnes argues that the “liberal construction of familial sympathy” was the foundational component for social and political unification in the early republic. As such, “the conflation of familial and social ties” created the conditions for the “eroticization of familial feeling,” where incest became “the ‘natural’ byproduct (19).

Following Jürgen Habermas’s theoretical project outlined in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the eighteenth century saw the rise of the “bourgeois public sphere.” For Habermas, this sphere is characterized by new forms of communication, urban space, and print culture. We see an explosion of textual production in the form of newspapers, novels, and political pamphlets, in addition to emergent realms of debate and sociality.

For scholarship on the early republic’s construction of public and private virtue, see Richard Beeman’s *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America*.

See, for example, Ira Berlin’s *Many Thousands Gone*, Leslie Harris’s *In the Shadow of Slavery*, Jean M. O’Brien’s *Firsting and Lasting*, and Gary B. Nash’s *Forging Freedom*.

For historical scholarship on nationhood and emergent American identity, see Jon Butler’s *Becoming America*, Peter C. Messer’s *Stories of Independence*, Winthrop Jordan’s “Familial Politics: Thomas Paine and the Killing of the King, 1776,” John Wood Sweet’s *Bodies Politic*, and Jack P. Greene’s *The Intellectual Construction of America*.

See, for example, Nancy Cott’s *Public Vows*, Merril D. Smith’s *Women’s Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook’s *Epistolary Bodies*, Michelle Burnham’s *Captivity and Sentiment*, and Karen A. Weyler’s *Intricate Relations*.

See, for example, Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* and *The Promise of Happiness*, Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black*, Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds*, and Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*. 
CHAPTER 2
THE PURSUIT OF UNHAPPINESS: QUEER MELANCHOLY IN HANNAH W. FOSTER’S THE COQUETTE

Why did the new nation place such emphasis on happiness? After all, the Declaration of Independence guarantees “certain unalienable Rights, [which] among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (“Declaration”; emphasis added). In his 1720 sermon delivered in celebration of a new plantation in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, Pastor Robert Breck points to a specific way to achieve happiness. He states, “I suppose it to be the desire of you all who are now Settling this… Plantation, that it may be a Flourishing Place, and that you may be a Happy people: The only Way to make it so, is the way you have been directed to” (14). Here, Breck locates his congregation’s happiness in “directed,” albeit divine, object choice. While that object choice is God and His laws, Breck’s affective articulation garners significance in that it illustrates how, as Sara Ahmed so poignantly notes, “happiness…turns us toward objects,” whether tangible or intangible, to make us content, pleased, and feeling good (Promise of Happiness 21). Yet, happiness is also exclusionary. Since Breck is creating a vision of happiness through moral distinction, his affective worldview is contingent upon the ways one becomes happy and achieves happiness through identification and dedication to religious objects. For Breck, one must occupy a specific social subject position within the space of congregational worship in order to become happy. Happiness, for Breck, is narratively oriented through focused, ministerial guidance. Thus, if we read through Breck’s “directed” call, we can begin to imagine how anxiety and fear may emerge when a subject finds happiness in a wrong object choice, failing to make the right or good object choice decision (Ahmed 13).
Enlightenment philosophy, particularly the work of John Locke, help illustrate how such narratives of good and bad object choice adapted as the colonies transformed into a republic. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)—a foundational text in the philosophy of mind—Locke defines happiness as the opposite to pain. He writes:

> Happiness…in its full extent, is the utmost pleasure we are capable of; and misery the utmost pain: and the lowest degree of what can be called happiness, is so much ease from all pain, and so much present pleasure, as without which, any one cannot be content. Now because pleasure and pain are produced in us by the operation of certain objects, either on our minds or our bodies, and in different degrees; therefore what has an aptness to produce pleasure in us, is that we call good, and what is apt to produce pain in us, we call evil. (239).

For Locke, happiness is linked to euphoria in that it is the “utmost pleasure” the subject can attain and experience. Defining happiness as “pleasure” and unhappiness, or what he calls “misery,” as “pain,” Locke illustrates the drastic affective forms the subject can occupy and move between. Yet, these affective forms can be calculated, defined, and put into empirical frameworks by their “different degrees” of intensity; in essence, he works to harness the spirit of feeling within Enlightenment discourse. These intensities, according to Locke, are not only affective states that impact our “minds” and moods, but they are also powerful forces that have the potential to take hold of and seize our “bodies.” In order to avoid subsuming “pain,” which he emphatically calls “evil,” the subject must be directed toward and recognize “certain objects,” which are pleasure-producing “good” objects, as the proper route(s) for achieving happiness.

In order to illustrate how happiness is achieved and how pleasure is produced, Locke considers the role of appetite. His portrait of an avid grape-lover helps illustrate the place of object choice in defining happiness:

> [A]ny one reflecting upon the thought he has of the delight which any present or absent thing is apt to produce in him, has the idea we call
LOVE. For when a man declares in autumn when he is eating them, or in spring when there are none, that he loves grapes, it is no more but that the taste of grapes delights him: let an alteration of health or constitution destroy the delight of their taste, and he then can be said to love grapes no longer. (216-17)

Here, Locke illustrates how finding love in an object choice is one particular route for achieving happiness. In other instances, however, love is the byproduct of happiness. Following the logic of his example, the man who enjoys eating grapes, which is his happy object choice, finds pleasure not only in their “delight[ful]” taste but in the idea of their flavor and palatability. To elucidate further, love is the conduit through which the subject finds happiness because he or she has placed their affective attachments, expectations, and aspirations in that object. Love names that feeling of attachment, vulnerability, intimacy, and belonging that sustains the subject’s drive toward happiness as shared or mutual experience. Since the subject has placed their happiness in that object, there is the expectation that the subject will receive pleasure from that object. In the grapes example, the man has a preconceived notion of what the grapes will taste like before he puts them in his mouth. He expects a sweet, succulent, and juicy burst of intensity on his tongue, which we can imagine as the precipice of idealized fantasy, before pleasure is ever fully realized or produced.

Thus, for Locke, pleasure is experienced not only through the physical dimensions of the self, but also through the psychic impetus to want to be happy. The man who finds “delight” in grapes needs to sustain the projection of the image in his psyche (the image of the grapes’ taste, flavor, and texture). That image, then, needs to be codified as pleasure’s reality through the actual (physical) consumption of the grapes themselves. The subject’s infatuation with the object choice, felt as love, requires thorough compatibility between the image of the object choice and its tangible
manifestation. If the expectations of the object are not met, the subject falls out of love with the object. As such, the subject is no longer *happily in love*, thereby disrupting his or her route to happiness, because pleasure is no longer present in the *idea and reality*. The subject’s affective attachment to the object that gives it meaning and value is now lost and meaningless. Thus, the subject’s image of the happy object choice cannot sustain happiness because of the potential risk of falling into unhappiness. Indeed, waiting for pleasure that may never or no longer be can be a dangerous thing.

When we put Locke’s philosophy of happiness alongside the Founding Fathers’ political project, we can imagine how the “pursuit of happiness” was tailored to guide the citizenry towards happiness through the right use of feeling and the right object choices that would fuel right feeling. Since eighteenth century republicanism defined itself as antithetical to monarchy, aristocracy, and inherited rule, the Founding Fathers instantiated the belief in civic virtue as a necessary element for protecting liberty and sovereignty. The concept of civic responsibility rested on the articulation of an individual’s performance of virtue as the route for vilifying corruption, and thereby protecting liberty from tyrannical and authoritarian regimes of power. Virtue, for the Founding Fathers, was an ideal and a duty—it was constitutive of the concept of citizenship. As such, “the preservation of liberty rested on the ability of the people to maintain effective checks on wielders of power…[and] rested on the vigilance and moral stamina of the people” (Bailyn 65). The virtuous citizen rejected self-interest for the common good, defending freedom and eradicating corruption. Thus, the virtuous citizen was a happy citizen in that he or she embodied the moral principles of civic society, thereby *protecting and inhabiting* liberty in the new nation.
However, this chapter journeys away from the early republic’s route toward (normative) happiness, and considers instead how feelings disrupt the national injunction to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” through an alternative sentimental rhetoric, one grounded in the pursuit of unhappiness. Revisiting Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), I depart from the dominant literary historiographical approach, argued by Richard Godbeer and others, that read Foster’s purpose as primarily didactic: warning women of the dangers of seduction, and seeking to regulate and stabilize women’s behaviors, manners, and conducts. As such, the explicit narrative content of Eliza Wharton’s newfound freedom brought about by the death of her old suitor, the competition between the kind-hearted Rev. Boyer and the suave (yet manipulative) rake Major Sanford for her affections, their accusations of Eliza’s coquetry, Eliza’s dejection upon losing a suitor, her friends’ increasing concern over her depression, and Eliza’s eventual death create the conditions where feeling right in the early republic is marked as an imperative and a necessity. However, by drawing attention to the ways women know, feel, and experience melancholy in Foster’s text—as both a form of pleasure and personality—I reconsider the disruptively queer potentials of affect in the sentimental tradition, which can easily be extended to fueling epistolary practice and writing itself.²

Drawing upon recent scholarship in affect studies and queer theory, I will argue that Foster’s novel produces and inculcates a counter-narrative of (wrong) feeling that subverts proper affects for perverse pleasures. I will specifically focus on charting out Eliza’s good bad feelings, by which I mean those practices of grief and suffering that are demanded of her as part of the performance of virtue, and bad feelings, which are
disruptive emotional states that often take the form, I argue, of queer melancholy. This is done in order to demonstrate how melancholic pleasure becomes a way of fueling sentiment in *The Coquette*. The overarching goal of this chapter is to reconfigure scholarly paradigms about the sentimental novel as central to shaping the values and virtues of the early republic, especially through its regulation of women’s sexuality. Thus, queer melancholy changes how we approach the role and purpose of sentiment in the early republican novel, resisting and challenge didacticism with affective incongruity. While the sentimental novel is made legible through its moral instruction and guidance toward happy object choices, I ultimately demonstrate how the tools of queer theory—particularly scholarship on affect and the antisocial thesis—can help us to understand *The Coquette* not as lesson for young women to avoid bad object choices, but as a queer reorientation for locating happiness in sad or bad object choices.

Appropriating Sara Ahmed’s recent work in *The Promise of Happiness*, I use queerness here as a way of describing a form of affective politics. By this, I mean “bodies that desire in the wrong way,” and experience certain emotions through “unconventional routes” and narratives (Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 115). Queerness is positioning the desire for happiness, which is normatively viewed as unhappiness, “with a feeling of being out of place, of being not quite at home, of not being able to share in the happiness of others”—a feeling of backwardness, incongruity, and displacement (152). As Ahmed so eloquently argues, queerness is “placing…happiness in the wrong objects” (155). In the case of *The Coquette*, “melancholy reflections” (218), “melancholic event[s]” (34) and even “melancholic air[s]
on the harpsichord” (225) preoccupy Eliza’s imagination and fuel her desires. Thus, queer melancholy could be thought of as feeling blue for all the wrong reasons. In other words, it is a failure to locate happiness in the ‘right’ objects, which can include marriage and domesticity. Queer melancholy is taking pleasure in the un-pleasurable without fully realizing how illicit those pleasures are.

Queering feeling in Foster’s novel and sentimental novels more broadly becomes a larger project of “reparative reading”—a process that begins by abandoning the imagined narrative of the reader (the speculation of how a text was experienced)—a figure who has become so interwoven into the fabric of eighteenth century American literary studies. In Touching Feeling: Affect Pedagogy, Performativity, Eve Sedgwick explains that reparative reading practices are “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150-51). What is lost or ruined by this form of reading is recuperated through surprise and continuity. I want to resist reading the sentimental novel as an “object” embedded in a specific code of feeling. By this, I mean an “object” that is demarcated by its cultural production and whose epistemological inscriptions and affective exchanges are predetermined. Bruce Burgett echoes these feelings in his book Sentimental Bodies. He argues that the “the critical fiction of the ‘female reader’” is a problematic attempt at “wedding sentimentality and sociality by deploying the category woman as a public site of readerly identification” (95). Thus, by reimagining the sentimental novel as a site of “sustenance” for multiple “selves and communities” who desire, feel and imagine in non-linear ways—and who attach meaning to “objects” not yet thought meaningful—I offer a productive apparatus
for approaching the pedagogy of feeling as a crash zone of queer possibility. In the case of this chapter, I investigate these unrestrained possibilities by focusing on a small (but equally generous and fulfilling) archive of feeling, which is Eliza’s queer melancholy.

**Literary Historiography: Gender, Virtue, Nation**

Scholarship on *The Coquette*, past and present, tends to frame the novel around limiting conceptions of gender and nation, while queer criticism can work to challenge or transform these scholarly paradigms, providing complex readings of Eliza’s psychology and subjectivity. One of the foundational preoccupations of literary scholars is reading *The Coquette* through sentiment’s socio-political implications. For example, Walter Wenska Jr. reads the novel as a form of American allegory (250), contrasting coquettish Eliza and libertine Sanford’s excessive quest for freedom to Lucy’s (Eliza’s best friend) more admirable pursuit of “modest freedom,” one that reconciles “liberty and matrimony…the individual and the social order,” which in turn, authorizes “civil liberty” (253). While Wenska’s reading of *The Coquette* was innovative in that it addressed the political implications of Foster’s work by highlighting the link between libertinism and moderate dissent, it came under scrutiny by a wave of feminist scholars who problematized his genderless and universal claims about freedom.

In her 1986 edition to *The Coquette*, Cathy Davidson argues that the novel explores limits and paradoxes of sentiment—insofar as the genre cannot fully represent and grasp the realities, complexities, and experiences of eighteenth century womanhood. She elucidates that “the form itself—or the writer—cannot imagine a life beyond her society’s limitations without violating the essential social realism on which sentimental fiction…is ultimately based” (xix). Here, Davidson’s central argument about Foster’s novel and the woman question circulates around gendered predetermination,
social stagnancy, and patriarchal domination. For Davidson, the promises of liberty and freedom in the new nation are not only concerns for the heroine or protagonist of *The Coquette*, but also for the writer herself. Thus, in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Davidson reconstructs the narrative of Eliza’s rise and fall as such:

The full tragedy of the novel…is that ultimately there was no tragedy at all—only the banal predictability of a fall that was precisely what the most conservative proponents of the status quo labored to prevent. Or perhaps the tragedy is that it can readily be reduced to this formulation and is thus reduced even in the telling. (231)

Here, Davidson centralizes the place of Foster’s novel in ever increasing debates over women’s roles in the early republic, in addition to related conceptions of authority and power. Through her compelling reading of the sentimental form, Davidson argues that the novel moves beyond reductionist readings of allegorical seduction, and moves toward a space of social and ideological critique, thereby displacing sentiment’s rigid didacticism. By this, Davidson problematizes the sentimental novel’s drive to educate women, while simultaneously disavowing them through restrictive social morals, rules, and codes. She argues that *The Coquette* engages in a discursive dialog between the author, text, and reader, inviting and soliciting participation—albeit precariously—about the woman question, female education, and marriage in the evolving public sphere. As I develop my queer intervention, Davidson’s critique can be extended to include the ways gendered disavowal is reformulated through illicit feelings that breach the boundaries of didacticism—feelings that are the subject of intense theorization and not simply socio-thematic evidence.

An equally related preoccupation of literary scholars concerns the political implications of Foster’s novel, especially the symbiotic relationship between gender,
virtue, and nation-building. In “Domesticating ‘Virtue’: Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg extends Davidson’s argument, and takes up Foster’s renunciation of romance, or the rejection of the sublime and irrational as illustrated in the fictions of Ann Radcliffe and other eighteenth century historical and Gothic romance writers, in order to demonstrate that the genre “not…[only] taught women sexual passion for men, but because [it] taught women to renounce their own reason and independence” (177). Smith-Rosenberg shows that Foster’s cautionary warning addresses all Americans. As such, the figure of the coquette functions metaphorically as desire itself, and the speculative drive for financial and social opportunity in the new nation. Thus, The Coquette embodies and interrogates the lived culture that characterizes middle-class life and the emergent market economy in post-Revolutionary War America. Kristie Hamilton continues on this thread of scholarship and further elaborates upon the gendered dynamics of the novel. She investigates the codes of women’s conduct in both the public and private spheres, and she reads Eliza’s social drives and ambitions alongside the demands of civic virtue. As Michael Warner notes in The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America: “[O]ne of the ideological functions of the seduction novel…was to integrate the authority of public opinion with self-present virtue rather than reflective management of esteem” (174). As such, Hamilton explains this tension through Eliza’s “vacillation and resulting seduction,” which “stem[s] from a paralysis of will brought about by the inadequacy of republican ideology vis-à-vis the social instability of her milieu” (136). For both Smith-Rosenberg and Hamilton, The Coquette is an important text for explaining and exploring the wider social and political implications of eighteenth
womanhood and nation building, which I seek to reformulate in terms of Eliza's antisociality and seemingly unfitness for civic virtue in the public sphere.¹⁰

In the early 1990s, attentive focus was placed on the modes of female empowerment in *The Coquette*, particularly Foster’s depiction of a community of women, letter writing, and female friendship.¹¹ For example, Claire C. Pettengill argues that the “bonds of female friendship…shape Eliza’s thoughts and actions as much as any other system of values, and work in the novel both to advance and retard the more conventional plot” (186). Pettengill reads Eliza’s reaction to Lucy’s engagement and subsequent marriage as the “climax of the drama of feminine bonding that runs throughout the novel” (196). As such, Eliza is forced to “completely…reformulate her sense of self and sense of purpose” outside of her intimate relationship with Lucy. Eliza subsequently falls into a “depression” because she cannot conform to the modes of respectability (marriage and domesticity) demanded of her by her circle of female friends. According to Pettengill, Eliza’s depression causes her to refuse Boyer’s marriage proposal, thereby making herself vulnerable to seduction by the rakish Sanford (197). John Paul Tassoni takes up a more conservative reading of female friendship, arguing that the rhetoric of virtue hinders and oppresses the language, advice, and dialog of Eliza’s circle. He further elucidates that “despite the characters’ intense concerns for one another, the regard of Wharton’s friends for her economic states and her virginity displaces their affective vocabulary” (104). More recently, however, Ivy Schweitzer challenges Tassoni’s reading in her book *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature*. She forcefully argues that Foster’s novel “proposes same-sex and cross-gender friendship as a sociopolitical
alternative to unequal and repressive Federalist notions of marriage” (23). In all three instances, female friendship and the seduction plot are inextricably linked to women’s lives and the gendered negotiations of early republican discourse. I depart from this wave of scholarship by exploring the ways Eliza puts her hopes, aspirations, and happiness in the wrong object choice, namely her friendship with Lucy.

A concurrent wave of criticism during the 1990s focused specifically on Foster’s epistolary structure and the act of letter-writing. In her 1996 Penguin edition introduction to *The Coquette* and William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), a sentimental novel about the dangers of seduction, unbridled passion, and unexpected incestuous relations, Carla Mulford examines the ways Foster’s novel “enables us to take into account the complicated ways in which language and spoken intents push up against the normative expectations of society” (xlvi). For Mulford, Eliza’s letter-writing is empowering because it allows her to “construct a space for certain freedoms of action,” while it paradoxically “constitute[s] her self-destruction” by moving outside the (feminine) space of the private sphere and toward the boundary-breaching limits of the (masculine) public sphere. In her book *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*, Elizabeth Barnes extends Mulford’s analysis, explaining that *The Coquette* seduces “audiences into [an] intimate relationship with patriarchal authority after the Revolution.” She explains that through the deployment of sentimental rhetoric, Foster’s text “encourage[s] a heteroerotic” body politic construction, “whereby both ideal readers and citizens are imagined as suggestible women…of a democratic paternalism” (41). Barnes locates Foster’s “epistolary frame” as the conduit through which she can create Eliza’s character in complex terms—not only serving as sympathetic and didactic
figure, but also an autonomous and desiring figure as well. According to Barnes, these paradoxical structural and aesthetic elements contribute to Foster’s mediated stance toward sympathy, sentiment, and seduction, complicating the routes toward ‘proper’ “female education” and knowledge dissemination (68). While the language of feeling appears to offer a contained route toward ‘proper’ edification in the epistolary form, I work to challenge this foreclosure by taking up Eliza’s queer feelings that undercut this didactic stagnancy.

By the late 1990s, a new wave of scholarship focused on the intricacies of affect and Foster’s sentimental form. In her book *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel*, Julia Stern locates a “feminized zone of imagination” in *The Coquette* and other novels from the latter part of the eighteenth century, which she reads as part of the deployment of a republican ideological critique (6). Stern argues that women writers from the period rendered republican ideology unemotional and detached from gendered experience and existence. As such, republican ‘feeling’ was “unmoored from…fellow feeling,” privileging and excluding any subject position that falls outside of white, prosperous manhood; in essence, Federalist sympathies were selective and exclusionary (186). Stern argues that the culture of sentiment gave women a space for carving out an “alternative vision of democratic community,” recuperating and reclaiming those individuals who fall outside of normative definitions of a republican body politic (7). By focusing on a seemingly insignificant scene from *The Coquette* about female equestrianism, Stern argues that the sport is a metaphor for Eliza’s desire for freedom. Comparing Eliza’s palatability for equestrianism to Lucy’s condemnation of the sport, Stern displaces the utopian scholarship on idyllic
female community formation. Instead, she forcefully explains the novel’s tragic ending as Eliza’s unyielding drive for sympathy, where her literal and figurative corpse, even in death, signals her quest for national belonging. I find Stern’s scholarship about sentiment, social drive, and mourning compelling, and I work to extend her reading through the affective turn in queer studies.

In Sentimental Bodies, Bruce Burgett extends Stern’s reading, exploring the relationship between sentiment, embodiment, and national citizenship in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. Burgett’s book project seeks to interrogate early national constructions of civic and political life. He examines the multifaceted elements that comprise different spheres of influence and belonging, including the interrelations between “democracy, liberalism, and republicanism; sensation, sentiment, and sentimentality; body and mind; public and private; political and social; sex, gender and sexuality” (19). By striving to “locate these concepts within the texts and arguments from which they emerge,” Burgett illustrates the complex ways history is narrated, constructed, and taught (20). In particular, he demonstrates, drawing upon Michael Warner’s work in Letters of the Republic and Jürgen Habermas’s The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, how the culture of sentiment worked to demarcate and delineate the public from the private sphere through the intersections of Enlightenment thought and the deployment of liberal (social) bodies. As such, Burgett’s reading of The Coquette departs from Cathy Davidson’s earlier aforementioned intervention in that it rests upon a fiction of the female reader. Instead, Burgett argues “that it constructs that category by encouraging a fantasy of identification between the republican citizen whose ‘mind has no sex’ and the sentimental subject for whom
anatomy is (only) in the process of becoming destiny” (95). Indeed, Burgett’s project is significant and timely in that it interrogates the conceptual linkage between sentimentality, sociality, and sexuality—three analytic categories that fuel my own queer intervention.15

By the early twenty-first century to the present, scholarship on Foster’s novel is thematically woven around constructions of the self, which I conceive of as disarticulations, and the tensions that emerge when the self is performed, displayed, and negotiated in the public and private spheres.16 For example, Elizabeth Dill examines how “Eliza’s sexuality is…inextricably bound to the domestic sphere.” Furthermore, Dill argues that Eliza’s “seduction is more complicated than a simple resistance to the household as an institution that robs women of liberty, for it is also the place where she acquiesces to a condition of desire in which liberty, strictly speaking, is no longer at stake” (3). In Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson’s Early American Women, Marion Rust argues that The Coquette “look[s] for solutions in the individual subject,” and “as an epistolary novel…[it] epitomizes these atomistic tendencies of the period” (84). Anna Mae Duane argues that The Coquette “speaks to a nightmare haunting a nation founded on rational self-determination—a scenario in which the body’s claims overrule the minds wishes.” As such, Duane reads “the body itself” as the force through which “women’s selfhood” in undone in Foster’s novel (39). In all three cases, the self and the inevitability of seduction fuel and propel these interpretations of Foster’s text. While these recent scholarly endeavors focus on subjectivity and the body’s materiality, we can effectively extend these analyses to intangible aspects of selfhood and sexuality, particularly emotions and feelings.
Finally, in his recent article “Elizabeth Whitman’s Disappearance and Her ‘Disappointment,’” Bryan Waterman investigates the proliferation of seduction narratives and images in late eighteenth century print culture, particularly newspapers. Waterman interrogates Foster’s defense of The Coquette as a “novel founded on fact,” and he works to recuperate the literary life, mythology, and circulation of Elizabeth Whitman’s tale. While Foster used Whitman’s narrative as inspiration for her novel’s development, Waterman also notes other literary and social responses to the scandalous incident. He elucidates:

The meanings assigned to Whitman’s life and death from her day to our own have been more varied than consistent. Though Foster’s novel positioned Wharton simultaneously as a coquette and a victim of seduction (leading two centuries of readers to disagree about the novel’s attitude toward her), the two other most-circulated versions of her story—the autobiographical poem ‘Disappointment’ and the epitaph on her headstone—position her as something else: an intelligent, self-determined woman, flawed but responsible for her own actions. (326)

Here, Waterman illuminates the multifaceted and shape-shifting uses of Whitman’s narrative. He argues that the scholarly trend to disidentify Foster’s historical influence from her novel’s development is limiting because fiction and “seduction stories” in particular, “plotted against autonomous female sexuality” within a didactic framework (328). Waterman cogently argues for a reconsideration of the archives from which we understand the role (and related influences) of seduction and women’s desires and sexualities in early American literature and culture. By taking up this critical practice, he explains that we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of female agency and sexual power in eighteenth century America. I want to extend Waterman’s call to reformulate historiographies of sexuality to include, as Ann Cvetkovich notes, archives of feeling.
Sentimental Sadness and Melancholic Feelings

Mounting a queer reading of *The Coquette* through a consideration of melancholy’s enduring (e)-affects requires a methodology to demarcate normative and non-normative feelings, proper and improper emotional responses. As the waves of scholarship on Foster’s novel have attested, the eighteenth century sentimental writing tradition attempted to wed civic virtue to the moral impetus of feeling right. Bruce Burgett argues that the sentimental novel form “provided a surface upon which sensations were expressed for a public that could imagine itself as respecting the autonomy of every body, and it provided a literary site for the management of those sensations through collective and potentially heterogeneous means” (3-4). The sentimental tradition contrasted from Enlightenment thinking in that it subverted the workings of the pragmatic (or rational) mind’s ability to produce truth for the subject’s internal capacity to feel, which would in turn produce truth. The sentimental novel’s affective power was contingent upon the idea that morals and ethics couldn’t be put into empirical or quantifiable terms. Instead, sentimentalists believed in an intrinsic human nature that could be molded and shaped to produce a moral sensibility, or what we may refer to as a delicate and refined responsiveness to affective stimuli. This sensibility valorized correct or normative ways of feeling, and served as the social adhesive for uniting the nation through affective displays of virtue and character. In addition, central to this sensibility was the idea of sympathy, which, as Marvin B. Becker notes, shifts in the eighteenth century from “the emotions of pity and compassion” to a “key emotion allowing one person to experience the feelings of another” (58). Exuberant displays of feeling, mapped onto the body, were thus situated as proper indicators of the subject’s morals and ethics. Sentimental novels, such as *The Coquette*, became the medium
through which writers could create a space of overflowing sensibility and empathy, while simultaneously serving as didactic tools for guiding the reader through emotionally-laden scenes of narrative, image, and character development.

If, then, the eighteenth century sentimental novel created a stimuli and response system for right ways of feeling, it also created a system of values for achieving that affective (and synonymously political) vision. Richard Godbeer explains that the sentimental novel preoccupied itself with discussions about “courtship, sexual danger, and moral responsibility” (265). In particular, the seduction plot—the trope of the innocent women attempting to safeguard her chastity and virtue from the rapacious rake in fear of abandonment—came to characterize the genre’s content throughout the eighteenth century. Godbeer explicates that this trope was fueled by growing concerns over women’s newfound personal freedoms in the early republic. As such, the content of sentimental novels focused on “moral guardianship” and the restricting roles imposed upon women as they circulate throughout the public sphere, coded as the rules of etiquette, engaging in the processes of courtship. “The etiquette espoused by didactic literature sought to replace external restraints that were no longer effective with new internal inhibitors…[that were meant to contain] women’s agency,” writes Godbeer (266). While at the same time, however, the sentimental novel and republican rhetoric championed symbolic white womanhood as America’s “moral authority” and safe keeper of the nation (Godbeer 266). Thus, the sentimental novel and the seduction plot worked to reconstruct moral principles in order to harness the individual. It achieved this through the textual regulation and policing of illicit sex and sexuality. Moreover, if the eighteenth century sentimental novel’s purpose was to create and authorize a
text/reader response that links normative affective experience to the public sphere, then it also worked to direct readers’ attention to happy object choices in order to codify the promises of nationhood, belonging, and liberty. The sentimental form achieved this type of affective contentment through striking depictions of sad sentiments and weepy women, guiding the reader through overflowing feeling and action in order to inculcate moral instruction, thereby surmounting sadness for moral goodness, which in turn, produces happiness.

Since a spectrum of affects were necessary to the production and reception of the sentimental novel for guidance toward happiness, it is important to note that sadness and even melancholy are not necessarily bad or forbidden feelings in the literary form. Adam Smith’s understanding of “sentimental sadness” can help us to understand the deployment of melancholy as a normative, collective feeling in the sentimental novel. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith argues that “sentimental sadness without reaching the heart serves only to render the countenance and conversation impertinently dismal and disagreeable” (197). Here, Smith works to differentiate between common conceptions of sadness and “sentimental sadness.” Sadness appears to suggest an operative that dampers or discourages sociality, while “sentimental sadness” appears to facilitate it. Smith illustrates how communal sociability is brought on or prompted by communal melancholy. This affective dynamic is brought into being through shared spectacle, shared reading, shared conversation, or any number of catalysts. As such, “sentimental sadness” works as a conduit through which sympathy is authorized, and didactic affect is instantiated. The performance of tears, then, becomes the marker of sentiment inscribed onto the body. Indeed, Adam Smith’s
theorization of “sentimental sadness” illustrates the profound impact feeling blue had on the construction of sentimental rhetoric and broader forms of eighteenth century social thinking.

As such, melancholy detaches itself from normative feeling when it is experienced through lingering antisociality. By this, I mean interpersonal (private) feelings that fall outside of communal (public) instruction, disrupting didacticism’s power to discipline. Queer and psychoanalytic approaches to loss and melancholy have the potential to undo the culture of sentiment’s text-reader exchange as predetermined and regulated. The pioneering scholarship of Sigmund Freud helps us to begin to view these affective perversities. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” for example, Freud argues that mourning reaches its dénouement when the subject relinquishes their affective attachment to the lost object, which thus enables the subject to reconfigure their libidinal energies in another object. Freud places emphasis on the array of reactions to the experience of loss. Yet, for Freud, mourning and melancholia entail similar symptomatic responses, which include a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity” (244). In addition, he argues that proper displays of mourning can be explained through an examination of “reaction[s] to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one.” Melancholy, then, emerges as a displacement of mourning, which consequently makes the subject suspect of a “pathological disposition” (243; emphasis added). In either case, mourning is the response to loss through the performance of grief, which situates the mourner, or
subject, in an unfolding process of severing affective attachment to the object now lost.²²

Freud further developed his theory of mourning and melancholia in his seminal text The Ego and the Id. Most significantly, Freud argued that melancholy was inextricably linked to the experience of mourning, which marks an important turning point for his conceptualization of the individual. He explains that the ego can be imagined as a type of elegiac construction in which every loss constitutes a form of identification. Instead of viewing mourning as a linear process of detachment, reinvestment, and renewal, Freud explains that the ego is never unaffected and unmoved by mourning, and that the ego itself is constituted and formed by loss, which thereby helps us to understand processes of self-formation. He elaborates:

When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia...It may that by this introjection...the ego makes it easier for the object to be given up...It may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects...[making] it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and that it contains the history of those object choices. (Freud on Women 276)

Here, Freud illustrates the endless forms of grief or mourning the subject experiences. In addition, he illuminates the turbulent and intense modes of melancholia in mourning. The subject vigorously and violently attempts to purge the self of the memory and attachment to the lost object, and in the process, works to create an independent identification.

Judith Butler reworks the concept of melancholy from a queer theoretical perspective.²³ In The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection, Butler, drawing upon Freud, crafts an allegory between drag and heterosexuality, and claims that
melancholia can be viewed as a pathology of the normative subject. She elucidates that the “masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love.” For Butler, the logic behind melancholia and gender formation rests on the idea of an “incorporative fantasy,” in which “the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but ‘preserved’ through heightened feminine identification” (146). Here, Butler is building upon her earlier work on gender performativity, demonstrating how melancholia orchestrates the failed repetition of heterosexual realness. Since heterosexuality is organized around social codes and restrictions, Butler is arguing that normative genders are melancholic constructions and articulations; or, to use her language, heterosexual genders “form themselves through renunciating the possibility of homosexuality, a foreclosure which produces both a field of heterosexual objects and a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love” (146). Thus, homosexuality becomes “ungrievable” (139) in its simultaneous renunciation and preservation, transforming into desire and a “vehicle of satisfaction” that informs the creation of agency and self-reflexivity (143).24

From Freudian psychology to Butler’s elegiac gender, melancholy operates as an enduring force that constitutes the self. While Freud’s initial theorization of melancholy situates the normative self as able to surmount sadness through cathartic release, his later theorization and Butler’s intervention contribute to an understanding of melancholy as a lingering, transforming, and continuing (e)-affect. As Butler vigorously works to extend psychoanalytic renderings of melancholy by reconceptualizing the self and its other, I continue to heed this call, taking up melancholic perversities in the competing space of sentiment and seduction, feeling and movement. Psychoanalysis and queer
theory are thus important frameworks for examining how Eliza’s melancholy is an integral site for explaining bent feelings and constructions and articulations of the incongruous self. While *The Coquette* strives to harness and mend bad feelings both publically and privately (in terms of the public carrying over into the private), it ultimately fails to replicate a reality of homogenous affect between text and reader.

**Queering Melancholy**

Foster’s deployment of melancholy in *The Coquette* lends itself to a queer critique of affect not only because of its textual prevalence and subversive capacity, but also because of its lingering effects. While sadness is a temporary feeling of grief brought on by an unpleasing occurrence, melancholy is sadness that simply won’t go away. It becomes inscribed into an individual’s countenance, and offers a dynamic mode or outlet for reading character personality. For example, when Eliza, the young, unmarried protagonist, writes to Lucy, her recently-married best friend, about not wanting to go to Boston with Julia Granby—a younger, livelier version of her former self as a sociable flirt—Eliza wallows in unhappiness when she finds out that Major Sanford, her rakish suitor and infatuation, has married another woman of higher social status named Nancy. Eliza sorrowfully reflects: “I find it painful even to think of mixing again with the gay multitude. I believe the melancholy reflections by which I am more oppressed will be more effectually...surmounted by tarrying where they are rendered familiar, than by going from them awhile and then returning” (218). Here, she explains the “pain” she would experience by being “mixed” in with a group of “gay” people. From Eliza’s perspective, her unhappiness is discordant with the perceived happiness of others. She describes her “melancholy” as an “oppressing” debilitation that must be “effectually...surmounted” through anti-communality, or her rejection of women’s
friendship, community, and discourse. For Eliza, to be displaced into a temporal locale of happiness is to exacerbate her own unhappiness. While Eliza’s “melancholy” is initially a good bad feeling because of its reflective capacity for resolution, her compartmentalization and privatization of that feeling becomes pedagogically incoherent. Since the eighteenth century sentimental novel deployed same-sex friendship as a way of creating the conditions for active female solidarity, Eliza’s obstruction or disintegration of that community serves as a negation of public sphere participation. Eliza’s belief that melancholy cannot be resolved through sociality and friendship challenges the limits of sentimentalism and the problem of ‘feeling’ right in the early republic, and illustrates the persistent endurance of melancholy’s affecting power.

The novel opens with Eliza’s feelings upon the death of Rev. Haley, a suitor she only agreed to marry, she tells us, because her parents wanted her to, and because she estimated that he would soon die. Right from the start, Foster creates a culture of bad sentiments and unbound melancholy, and our queer reading helps us to see Eliza’s route toward happiness as necessitated through unhappiness. In fact, Eliza’s queer melancholy can be thought of as an embrace of the antisocial drive toward pleasure—a feeling of “anti-relationality” (164) that “depends on an unqualified will” for other object choices (Bersani 166). In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam defines “antisocial” as a dictated “unbecoming,” [and] a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate,” or an embrace of failure that circumvents loss as insuperable (144). To fully understand this, we must reconceptualize the antisocial thesis in queer theory to an eighteenth century context. In *Hanos*, Bersani famously questions “the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service” (113). He further elucidates that “homo-ness itself
necessitates a massive redefining of relationality,” and that “more fundamental than a resistance to normalizing methodologies is a potentially revolutionary inaptitude…for sociality as it is known” (76). Bersani works to create a queer project that shifts from a politics of respectability to alternative life-worlds characterized by an embrace of the negative, shameful, and abject. In the case of *The Coquette*, I use the antisocial thesis here in order to convey how Eliza’s desire to reject domestic normativity, immediately set up in her ‘positive’ reaction to her husband’s passing, and her later rejection of female friendship, hailed as failure, signal her exclusion from any participation in the public sphere. She privileges pleasure over womanly duty and conduct. While I’m not arguing that Eliza’s a proto-lesbian, I find Bersani’s analysis of “homo-ness” productive for illustrating how Eliza’s wrong way of feeling makes her unfit for civic virtue, thereby rendering her role as woman unstable and resistant to sentiment’s sanitization.

Bersani and Halberstam’s claims about antisociality are useful for imagining Eliza’s happiness in the unhappy event of Rev. Haley’s death, which is particularly striking given the generational shift between hierarchical to filial structures of belonging in eighteenth century America.25 By this, I refer to Eliza’s pleasure in freedom after giving in to the will of her parents to marry Haley. Her readiness to move on can initially be viewed as good bad feeling because she is proving her capacity for filial and peer rule, which in turn, demonstrates her readiness for freedom from older structures of authority characterized by the British royalization of America. In the second letter of the novel to Lucy Freeman (before she gets married), Eliza reflects:

*Time, which effaces every occasional impression, I find gradually dispelling the pleasing pensiveness which the melancholy event…had diffused over my mind. Naturally cheerful, volatile, and unreflecting, the opposite disposition I have found to contain sources of enjoyment which I*
was before unconscious of possessing… I have been, for a month or two, excluded from the gay world, and, indeed, fancied myself soaring above it.” (34-5)

Here, Eliza begins her letter by locating “melancholy” in the right object choice. Eliza’s melancholy is initially a good bad feeling because of its function as a co-performative bereavement ritual. Eliza is supposed to grieve over the loss of her husband, and she is also supposed to grieve over her newfound vulnerability as a single woman who does not have the financial and cultural capital needed to secure and protect her livelihood. Yet, here Eliza reveals melancholy to be a feeling of unbound desire. Eliza takes pleasure in being relinquished from the social institution of marriage, and she embraces her ambiguous future of “unbecoming” domesticity. She rejects “the promissory logics of happiness,” and in turn, embraces coquetry as choice (Ahmed, “Happy Futures, Perhaps” 166). Eliza suggests “time” becomes fragmented or obscured by her innermost feelings, which is a significant statement because of its early textual location and proximity in the novel—a moment before Eliza is fully cast into a receptive position in the public sphere, where her way of feeling becomes a collective concern among sentimental bodies and loose letters.

Furthermore, Eliza’s epistolary musings on Rev. Haly’s death, which she refers to as a “melancholy event,” create the conditions for antisocial queer readings of her “pleasing pensiveness.” She takes pleasure in reflecting and musing upon his death in private and reclusive somber, and she imagines all the opportunities his passing affords. On the surface level, this type of feeling appears to merely highlight her felicity in being temporarily reprieved from patriarchal authority and control. Yet, Eliza’s explanation that Haly’s passing “diffused over [her] mind” in “pleasing pensiveness” suggests a level of subsuming fantasy in risk, such as the possibility of shame,
castigation, or even annihilation by being and remaining husbandless. While Eliza’s initial freedom and embrace of coquetry can be read as newfound excitement—excitement for the possibility of luxury goods, fashion, entertainment (such as operas and balls), and agency in courtship and husbandry choice—her engrossed melancholic sentiment infers a queer personality that is beyond idiosyncratic, and suggests her (private) inability to feel right (Braunschneider 1-2). While Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, warns that coquetry needs to be contained because all women “possess it,” suggesting that “presence of mind, incisiveness…subtle observations…[and] cleverness” are innate rather than learned, Eliza’s queer melancholy deflects containment and discipline (563). Eliza’s assertion that she has “found…sources of enjoyment which [she] was before unconscious of possessing,” suggests that the inward sensation of her desires, or “sources of enjoyment,” are “unconscious” feelings and thoughts that pervade her unbound and dissolute mind. Displays of mourning, loss, and devastation—performative feelings that should accompany Rev. Haly’s death within the sentimental tradition and cult of true womanhood—are transformed by Eliza into “cheerful, volatile, and unreflecting” dispositions.

Perhaps the most salient section of the second letter is Eliza’s own imagined death and afterlife fantasy, driven by her antisocial pursuit of melancholic pleasure. As Eliza voluntarily “excluded” herself “from the gay world” for several months when she was caring for the sickly Rev. Haley, she fantasized about “soaring above it,” until she “descend[ed]…[to] find [her] natural propensity for…[the] active pleasures of life return[...].” Here, Eliza momentarily performs her normative pedagogical role as a grieving and suffering body, but this is immediately displaced by her imagined suicide to
“soar[ing] above” “this world.” As Eliza’s death fantasy “descend[s]” or fades into affective stability, she reiterates the “active pleasures” that fuel her most melancholic desires and sentiments that do not take kinship, intimacy, and relationality as points of articulation. Her wrong way of feeling becomes inscribed onto her body, amalgamating affect and material perversion, and potentially inciting a “cultural fantasy” of queerness that is inextricably linked to “fatal…jouissance” (Edelman 39). In Eliza’s fantasy, visions of reproductive futurity, domestic monogamy and security, and the promises of heteronormative (republican) hope are subverted for the death drive. In this light, Eliza’s queer melancholy can be explained as failure—a failure not only to reproduce the fiction of the couple and the family, but also a failure to reproduce the social. This scene perhaps offers a new way to interpret Eliza’s untimely demise beyond didactic fatalism, where Eliza’s failure to protect her virtue from the vilified and corrupt Major Sanford authorizes the necessity for her punishment. Instead, we can project a spectral image of Eliza, fulfilling her desire (beyond the precipice) to reach the dénouement of antisocial queer pleasure.

The conflation of queer melancholy and its impact on the body offers a productive outlet for exploring the dynamics of suffering in Foster’s novel, and to better explain affect’s potentials for creating a culture of perverse pleasure and ecstasy, which takes up the self as its point of rupture. In her book *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, Marianne Noble draws upon the scholarship of Roland Barthes in order to demonstrate that in the eighteenth century, suffering was “sentimental knowledge [that] derive[d] from feelings grounded in physical experience” (Noble 77). She further elucidates: “The eroticism of sentimental suffering was a double-edged
sword, functioning both as a discursive agent for the proliferation of oppressive ideologies and as a rhetorical tool for the exploration of female desire" (6). Here, Noble builds toward a pedagogy of literary masochism, which takes up readers’ delight (through exercising and sharing in exquisite sentiments of loss, pain and misery) in the suffering of characters. For Noble, sentimental novels display a form of eroticized masochism, which, on the one hand, can be read perversely—women readers taking pleasure in the pain and subjugation of women characters. On the other hand, she illustrates how masochistic pleasures in the sentimental form counter-discursively enable a space for women to create forms of embodiment, agency, and selfhood.

Noble’s claims are instrumental for revealing the interplay between unauthorized feeling and painful euphoria—mapped onto the body—and between women readers and sentimental texts. Extending Noble’s theorization, I argue that literary masochism is particularly destabilizing to the seduction narrative genre because of the potential emergence of associative fantasies between sex and death. In other words, readers may subversively engage in a character’s suffering beyond affective pedagogical premise, and imagine how suffering is lashed out and revealed on the tormented body, such as Eliza’s aforementioned imagined suicide, producing unyielding fantasies of pleasure and pain. As Leo Bersani memorably notes in “Is the Rectum a Grave?”: “It is perhaps necessary to accept the pain of embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality (Essays 15). If we extend Bersani’s claims to the eighteenth century sentimental tradition, we can imagine how the “pain of embracing” self-destructive womanhood in text may, in turn, produce a cult of womanhood that ‘embraces’ wrong feeling in reality, operating as a catalyst for
disrupting reproductive futurity and its promised route toward republican happiness. For example, early American women may read the scene of Eliza’s suicide fantasy, and instead of fearing for her or creating a sympathetic identification, they may desire her unbecoming domesticity that takes fatality as its point of embrace. The relationship between sentiment, affect, and the body are thus queer in their self-destructive potential.

Noble’s theory of literary masochism is a timely intervention that reveals a form of reparative reading, whereby backward and slanted sustenance is extracted from the novel in multiply fulfilling ways. While the female reader of The Coquette is supposed to be taught that “from the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton let the American fair learn to reject with distain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor,” she may voyeuristically engage in Eliza’s sorrow and misery throughout the novel, and even embrace her agonizing death after seduction is consummated (283). In maudlin scenes of struggle with virtue and vice, Eliza’s suffering may license readers imagined representation and fantasy. Holistically, “melancholy” is initially a bad good feeling because of its pedagogical attempts to educate audiences on the dangers of seduction, instilling a lasting cautionary message in the hearts of readers. Yet, the sad “story of Eliza Wharton” and the emotions that fuel the narrative’s coherence have the potential to proliferate a multitude of affective counter-narratives and sadomasochistic possibilities by extending melancholy’s queer horizons. As Eliza confesses: “I know the right, and I approve it too; I know the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue” (158). Here, Eliza’s remarks serve as a poignant example of a subversive pedagogy, capturing the way an audience could misread or misalign her ‘wrong’ feelings and pursuits.
The interplay between Eliza’s queer melancholy and literary masochism, which is a latently debased erotic exchange, can also be interrogated as a porous and permeable site of sexuality’s articulation beyond the borders of the body and its gratifying pleasures. Richard Godbeer explains that Foster’s novel stages a tension between courtship, freedom and women’s “moral initiative[s]” (292). While Godbeer’s observations are useful for exploring *The Coquette*’s plot-driven didacticism about sex and sentimental feeling, his arguments can be extended to include the queer affects associated with such newfound liberties and Eliza’s inability to choose the right suitor. In the space of the novel, Eliza fails to find happiness in the kind and gentle hearted Rev. Boyer, whom she finds to be boring, lackluster, and unremarkably unexciting. While Eliza’s social relations and community of female friends approve of Boyer, with Boyer himself ready to settle down, Eliza continues to pursue pleasure through flirtation with the knowingly corrupt Sanford, thereby obfuscating security and civic endorsement for risk.

In fact, Eliza’s queer melancholy is further felt as she maneuvers through experiences of jealousy, desire, and possessiveness in wrong object choices. A pertinent example of this occurs in *The Coquette* during Eliza’s jarring lamentation on the loss of Lucy to marriage—an integral moment in the novel when Eliza feels she cannot solicit the advice about courtship from her passionate friend. Eliza recounts Lucy’s wedding to Mrs. Richman, her older cousin and the woman who houses Eliza during the loss of her fiancé:

> The consonance of their dispositions, the similarity of their tastes, and the equality of their ages are a sure pledge of happiness. Every eye beamed with pleasure on the occasion, and every tongue echoed the wishes of benevolence. Mine only was silent. [T]he idea of separation, perhaps of an
alienation of affection, by means of an entire devotion to another, cast an involuntary gloom over my mind. (131)

Here, Eliza places attentive focus on reading Lucy’s character and mood, from her “disposition[s]” to her “taste[s].” When Eliza perceives Lucy as happy in her marriage, she suddenly becomes unhappy in Lucy’s happiness. Eliza’s unhappiness is significant not only because it is a failed emotional response to conjugal bliss—a classic form of queer melancholy—but also because her unhappiness is linked to yearning, wariness, and paranoia. Eliza locates pleasure in what she perceives she can no longer have, which is Lucy’s intimate “affection.” In this case, melancholy, or “involuntary gloom,” becomes queered when Eliza places her happiness in the wrong object choice, which is her flowing affection toward Lucy, while “every [other] eye beamed with pleasure” on Lucy’s marriage.

We can further view Eliza’s “involuntary gloom” over the (supposed) loss of Lucy as a form of “queer grief,” to borrow a term used by Sara Ahmed. Ahmed argues that “queer grief” is a disjointed feeling, parallel to the ways “queer relationships are not recognized.” To state less abstractly, Ahmed is explaining how kinship ties become affective hierarchies of belonging. She contends that queer grief “makes you become ‘nonrelatives,’ you become unrelated, you become not. You are alone in your grief” (**Promise of Happiness** 109). In the case of **The Coquette**, Eliza feels displaced and isolated because she cannot vocalize her enigmatic melancholy to Lucy. As Elizabeth Freeman argues in **The Wedding Complex**, conceptions of marriage are tied to “thinking about the social body, on the symbolics of connecting and belonging rather than just being or having” (50). Eliza’s melancholic sentiments are precisely melancholic because of their futile affective outcomes. Eliza feels isolated because she cannot engage in the
“social body’s” “pleasure[s]” of “belonging,” exacerbated by her feelings of “symbolic” disconnection and un-belonging to Lucy. In turn, Lucy cannot fathom Eliza’s unhappiness in her happiness, and thus cannot identify the degree of happiness she purports in her friendship with Eliza.

Still, after Lucy’s marriage and throughout the remainder of the novel, for which her affair with Sanford seems only an afterthought or byproduct of her grief over Lucy’s loss, Eliza can only locate happiness in her friendship with her newly married friend. This becomes a form of Eliza’s queer melancholy, bordering on the affectively erotic, because she attached a happy object choice to the painful realization that a complete exercise of that happiness will never come into fruition. Eliza writes to Lucy:

> I stand in need of the consoling power of friendship. Nothing can beguile my pensive hours…like your letters. Let me know how you are to be entertained this winter at the theatre. That, you know, is a favorite amusement of mine. You see I can step out of myself a little. Afford an assisting hand, and perhaps I may again be fit for society. (179)

In a letter that otherwise depicts Eliza’s courting woes, reflecting on Rev. Boyer and Major Sanford, her final remarks are striking. Eliza equates the “power of friendship” as both “consoling” and “beguile[ing],” suggesting enticement. Yet, this enticement or lure is not merely Eliza’s desire to have Lucy write her more letters, but Eliza’s hope that Lucy will join her in happy “amusement[s].” In a jarring juxtaposition, given the otherwise gloomy tone of the letter, Eliza’s hope for happiness is articulated as “step[ping] out of myself a little,” which Eve Sedgwick would refer to as a “double thrust of denunciation and reproximation” (Epistemology 216). Eliza’s “denunciation” is her ability to “step out” of courting lamentation, and step into a space, or “reproximation,” of blissful retreat, imagined through the experience of theater going. Her hope for happiness in the social, which is striking given her antisocial personality, “afford[s]” or necessitates [Lucy’s]
assisting hand.” Eliza’s “double thrust” into an imagined space of competing feelings and desires invokes her wistful longing for a connected happiness that she never completely casts of sight. In this light, Eliza becomes “happily queer” in that her happiness or prospect of happiness does not follow a happy script. Instead, her happiness is the correlative cause to her unhappiness, which in turn, can also produce unhappiness in others (Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness* 115).

Eliza’s queer melancholy thus has the potential to rearticulate sites of desire and pleasure in other objects. This plays out in the novel most significantly in her apathy toward Major Sanford’s continuous sexual advances. In Eliza’s final letter to Julia Granby before she consents to having sex with him—or, as Sanford glorifies to Charles Deighton, his confidant: “I entertained from her parleying with me”—she reflects upon the negativity of happy indulgences and passions (238). Eliza remarks,

> Having incurred so much censure by the indulgence of a gay disposition, I am now trying what a recluse and solitary mode of life will produce…I am pleased with nobody…I look around for happiness, and I find it not…If I indulge myself in temporary enjoyment, the consciousness of apprehension of doing amiss destroys my peace of mind. (231)

Here, Eliza begins her letter by discussing how excessive happiness in one’s “gay disposition” is grotesque. She then links this excessive happiness to sociality, and imagines how antisociality, “recluse and solitary…life,” will afford her other forms of happiness that are not quite so happy. Eliza’s future happiness in the antisocial could be thought of as her pursuit of queer pleasures—of desires that are not explicitly bound to other bodies (at least when she believes Lucy is no longer available. In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman contends that “queer pleasures are…matters of timing, and tropes for encountering, witnessing, and transforming” (58). Eliza finds the social life of happiness (and bodies that could
entertain her happiness) empty and void—she is “pleased with nobody.” As Eliza “look[s] around for happiness,” she only finds unhappiness. This statement is then juxtaposed by her claim to “temporary enjoyment,” which does not seem to adequately constitute a pleasure for “encountering, witnessing, and transforming” her current disposition. In fact, Eliza asserts that (social) pleasures of fleeting happiness will “destroy” her psyche.

Thus, Eliza’s decision to have sex with Major Sanford, rather than an excess of unrestrained desire (as traditionally read), might instead be explained as a form of masochism. Leo Bersani argues that masochism “means a certain pleasurable renunciation of one’s own ego boundaries, the pleasure of a kind of self-obliteration” (Essays 175). Because by the end of the novel Eliza can only imagine antisocial pleasure, her divestiture of virtue could be read as an antagonism to sentimental pedagogy’s social function, which can further help us to explain why Eliza stops writing after sexual consummation, relegated to the margins of (gendered) social discourse. In the final letter to her mother, a figure coping with the loss of her own husband and her daughter’s queer happiness which makes her unhappy, Eliza suggests the affectively freeing capacity of her actions: “O, the harmonious, the transporting sound! It has revived my drooping spirits, and will enable me to encounter…the trials before me” (263). When Eliza breaches her “own ego boundaries,” engaging in illicit (physical) social relations, her pursuit of melancholic pleasure causes a “self-obliteration.” She can no longer imagine herself in the pursuit of ‘normative’ happiness in the republic, displaced in a social sphere that renders her and her happiness discordant. Thus,
Eliza’s queer melancholy serves as an unhappy ending to her happiness in not being happy.

Ultimately, Foster’s novel helps us to unfold the complex relations between sex and sentiment, and the broader project of queering the sentimental tradition. At the end of the novel, Julia Granby writes to Eliza’s mother in order to inform her that her daughter received an appropriate and dignified epitaph on her gravestone. The epitaph states:

In memory of Eliza Wharton,
Is inscribed by her weeping friends, to whom she
Endeared herself
By uncommon tenderness and affection.
Endowed with superior requirements, she was still more
Distinguished
By humility and benevolence.
Let candor throw a veil over her frailties
[...]
She sustained the last painful scene
Far from every friend,
And exhibited an exam of calm resignation. (285)

Here, Eliza’s gravestone inscription is structured around its normative effects to “weep” the right way, even as it relocates Eliza within a homosocial space of love and ritual. The fiction of the reader and the fictional characters are ‘taught’ to coalesce in order to create a scene of homogenous, collective feeling. Through death, Eliza is recast into normative sociality through her friends’ performance of mourning in the absence of melancholy and the readers’ supposed moving response to it. By reclaiming Eliza’s “uncommon tenderness and affection,” her friends symbolically reify the sentimental novel’s drive to educate and inculcate the truths about the cult of womanhood. Yet, Eliza’s “uncommon…affection” also suggests affective idiosyncrasy. The artificiality and
forcedness of the claim to Eliza’s “humility and benevolence” produces incongruous sympathies.

While the novel works to harness Eliza’s affective queerness by “throw[ing] a veil over her frailties,” the reader is made privy to one “last painful scene.” “Far from every friend,” Eliza’s death is imagined as eerily “calm” and “benevolent.” Paradoxically, the descriptive memorial to the heroine’s life seems to respond more to her life-in-death as opposed to her life-alive. In this light, Eliza’s death drive continues, and her queer melancholy sustains itself even as it relishes in slow decay. While the sentimental form relegates Eliza to a “painful” death, punished for not protecting her virtue and falling victim to seduction, we can queerly return to that “last painful scene,” and imagine how Eliza takes pleasure in the un-pleasurable reality of her circumstances. In Letter XXVII, Selby, Boyer’s confidant, writes to his friend about Sanford’s sexual advances toward Eliza: “How…can we account for the pleasure which…[she] evidently receives from the society, the flattery, and the caresses” of him? (106). We can playfully subvert that question through Eliza’s queer melancholy and its ability to reconfigure and reformulate the roles of gender, sexuality, and its un-material and material manifestations in the novel.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the tools of queer theory, particularly scholarship in affect studies, psychoanalysis, and the antisocial turn, can help us to illuminate and explicate the profoundly queer dynamics of ‘wrong feeling’ in The Coquette. Instead of viewing sentiment as a fixed and stable mode of feeling, contingent upon a specific and unalterable female subject, I have worked to unearth the ways feeling ‘bad’ as ‘good,’ ‘unhappy’ as ‘happy,’ thereby queer, have the potential remap
the literary and cultural discourse on Foster’s novel and eighteenth century sentimental novels more broadly. My hope, which is perhaps a dangerous word choice considering this chapter’s content, is that I’ve provided alternative methodologies and frameworks for approaching the culture of sentiment and its unstable modes of gendered didacticism. Eliza Wharton’s queer melancholy aids us in unearthing and viewing that instability, locating happiness in things we wouldn’t normally view as quite so happy. Ecstasy, joy, elation, and bliss, feelings that tend to characterize happiness, should perhaps be approached with pleasurable caution.

Notes

1 In *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, Gordon S. Wood explains that the Enlightenment, which was a late seventeenth century and eighteenth century European cultural movement that valorized reason, rationality, logic, and individualism over tradition, had an influential impact on the Founding Fathers’ political philosophy. According to Wood, the American Revolution coincided with the Enlightenment’s political and social surge. As such, Wood reads both of these movements as analogously seeking to reform society through reason. Thus, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution can be imagined as statements for “a new future not just for Americans but for all humanity,” where the early republic is transformed into the world’s epicenter for freedom and enlightenment (Wood 37).

2 In *The Lives and Letters of an Eighteenth-century Circle of Acquaintance*, Temma F. Berg explains that the epistolary novel, or the “novel of letters,” “has often been linked to women’s increase[ed] literacy,” where the genre becomes a productive space for “exploring, constructing, and expressing women’s subjectivities.” She further elucidates that the act of letter writing gave women the power to create, interrogate, and transform the social worlds they inhabit (15). In a period of increased emphasis on the individual, the epistolary form allowed for the identification, mediation, and narrativization of the self, thereby producing the real.

3 As Tom Keymer problematizes in *Richardson’s Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader*, sentimental novel reception has been predominantly constructed around a mythic narrative of uncritical passivity. According to Keymer, “the reader...is to be kept sitting still by the entertainment value of the novels while the good author slyly injects [her] with regular doses of edification. No account is taken of the fiction’s inherent resistance to the simplicity of didactic messages, [nor the readers response to it,] and no satisfactory explanation...between narrative method and moral purpose is found” (61). Thus, the reader is situated as the receptacle of dichotomous didactic messages.


5 For early scholarship on gender and didacticism, see Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen’s “Gender and Writing Instruction in Early America: Lessons from Didactic Fiction.” Also see their piece “Monitoring Columbia’s Daughters: Writing as Gendered Conduct.”
For further scholarship on the gendered political implications of Foster's work, in addition to discussions about social contract theory, see Sharon M. Harris's “Hannah Webster Foster’s The Coquette: Critiquing Franklin’s America” in Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797-1901. In her essay, Harris argues that Foster carves out alternative spaces for women, removed from patriarchal structures and institutions that seek to control and mediate women’s lives and experiences. By satirizing Benjamin Franklin’s maxims, Foster, according to Harris, “illuminates the political ideology of excluding women from citizenship and systems of power that is fostered in the social milieu” (3). Thus, the novel can be imagined as a political tract.

For further scholarship on virtue, see David Waldstreicher’s “‘Fallen under My Observation’: Vision and Virtue in The Coquette.”

For more recent scholarship on economics and Foster’s epistolary novel, see Karen A. Weyler’s Intricate Relations: Sexual and Economic Desire in American Fiction, 1789-1814. Weyler carves out important directions for illustrating the “gendered but homologous forms of expenditure and exchange” in the sentimental form (25). For Weyler, the sentimental novel preoccupies itself with the regulation of women’s sexuality, while it also attempts to regulate men’s economic practices. She conveys how the public and private spheres were demarcated across gendered lines, where the public sphere was coded masculine, while the private sphere was coded feminine. Weyler’s book project rests upon these assumptions in order to demonstrate the ways “intricate relations among sexual and economic desires” fused in the sentimental form, albeit tenuously (23).

See also Grantland S. Rice’s The Transformation of Authorship in America, where he reads the Coquette as a critique of legal institutions and practices through the deployment of the seduction plot. Also see Gillian Brown’s The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture.

See also the 1989 forum sponsored by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture on “Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic.” Participants included Linda K. Kerber, Nancy F. Cott, Robert Gross, Lynn Hunt, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Christine M. Stansell.

For related scholarship on female friendship and the early U.S. novel, see Joseph Fichtelberg’s “Friendless in Philadelphia: The Feminist Critique of Martha Meredith Read.”

See also Jennifer Desiderio and Angela Vietto’s compelling 2011 Bedford introduction to Foster’s The Coquette and The Boarding School. In addition, see Jennifer Harris and Bryan Waterman’s 2012 Norton critical edition to The Coquette and The Boarding School.

For useful contextual information on early American literature and affect studies, see Peter Coviello’s “Agonizing Affection: Affect and Nation in Early America.” Also see Marianne Noble’s The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature, Lorrainy Carroll’s “Affecting History’: Impersonating Women in the Early Republic,” Joseph Fichtelberg’s Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870, and Martha Tomhave Blauvelt’s The Work of the Heart: Young Women and Emotion, 1780-1830.

For further scholarship on sympathy, see Andrew Burstein’s “The Political Character of Sympathy.”

Also see Burgett’s “Between Speculation and Population: The Problem of ‘Sex’ in Our Long Eighteenth Century.”

17 Also see Leonard Tennenhouse’s *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750-1850*. In particular, see Tennenhouse’s third chapter, “The Sentimental Libertine,” and his discussion of resurgent interest in Samuel Richardson novels in late eighteenth century America.

18 As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains, Elizabeth Whitman (1752-1788) came from an affluent family in New Haven, Connecticut. Whitman courted two ministers, yet she was also involved in an illicit affair with an anonymous lover. This subsequently led to Whitman’s premature pregnancy and eventual abandonment. Castigated from her social circle, Whitman fled New Haven. In July 1788, Whitman sought lodging at the Bell Tavern in Danvers, Massachusetts. Upon entering the tavern, Whitman referred to herself under the pseudonym “Eliza Wharton.” Soon thereafter, Whitman gave birth to a stillborn and she herself passed away in labor. This circumstance became a scandal throughout the New England area, causing much speculation and sensation in local print culture (*This Violent Empire* 174).

19 Important historicist scholarship on the eighteenth century sentimentalism and its ability to forge social relations include Tom Lutz’s *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*, Ann Douglas’s *Feminization of American Culture*, Andrew Burstein’s *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America’s Romantic Self-Image*, and Sarah Knott’s *Sensibility and the American Revolution*.


21 See, for example, Nancy Cott’s *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835*, which provides a timely historicist account of the gendered public and private spheres in early America.

22 For further scholarship on Freud’s theorization of melancholia, see Tammy Clewell’s “Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss.” Also see David Kennedy’s *Elegy*.

23 Although outside of this project’s scope, Freudian psychology and the topic of melancholia made a profound impact on social and cultural theorizations of the AIDS epidemic by lesbian and gay studies scholars. In “Mourning and Militancy,” for example, Douglas Crimp pays obvious tribute to Freud’s landmark essay, yet he omits the term ‘melancholy’ from his title in order to explore, explain, and counter the wider compulsive and neurotic implications of the term. Crimp writes that he “loathes…reasons to accuse gay men of any pathological condition,” and that he strives to “draw an analogy between the pathological mourning and the sorry need of some gay men to look upon our imperfectly liberated past as immature and immoral” (143). Operating within this framework, Crimp adamantly strives to depathologize the gay subject, while he simultaneously reinscribes melancholy’s latent irrational effects—hailing gayness and melancholy as incompatible with one another. Yet, as later AIDS activism illustrates, made legible through the AIDS Memorial Quilt and other cultural practices and performances, mourning was reimaged as a form of social protest and critique.

24 Other past and present discussions of queerness and melancholia circulate around intersectionality and activism, carving out innovative directions for approaching psychoanalytic theorizations of subject formation. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, for example, José Esteban Muñoz, forcefully claims that “for queers…melancholia [is] not a pathology or a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism, but…a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead to the various battles we must wage in their names” (74). More recently, David Eng and Shinhee Han “suggest that the melancholic’s absolute refusal to relinquish the lost other—to forfeit alterity—at any cost
delineates one psychic process of an ethical death drive, in which the loved but lost racial object…is so overwhelmingly important to the ego that it is willing to preserve it” at all costs, even in the face of annihilation (Feeling of Kinship 157). As such, melancholy is a useful conceptual apparatus for exploring and explaining the ways grief contribute to racial or ethnic subject formation.

25 In Prodigals and Pilgrims, Jay Fliegelman explains that eighteenth century Americans were bound to articulate their economic, social, and political structures and arrangements in terms of familial relations. Drawing upon the Enlightenment philosophies of Locke and Rousseau, Fliegelman argues that in a new nation, the metaphorical American child needed to break away from the British parent in order to attain rationality, morals, and independence. This imagined relationship was brought into fruition through anti-colonial sentiment and the tyrannical ‘parent’s’ refusal to allow the ‘child’ to enter into metaphorical adulthood (9-28).
CHAPTER 3
THE HISTORY OF CONSTANTIUS AND PULCHERA: CAMP, PARODY, POLITICS

In June 1789, Nathaniel Coverly, the publisher of *The Gentlemen and Ladies Town and Country Magazine*—a Boston based monthly magazine—issued a statement to his readers: “We are happy in having it in our power to furnish our readers with an original story this month, of *Constantius and Pulchera*, with an elegant Copper-Plate, suitably adapted to the same” (qtd. in Faherty and White 1). The anonymously-authored romance novella was subsequently serialized in the next six issues, concluding in January of 1790, which was also the magazine’s final issue.¹ The novella proved immensely popular, going through at least fourteen editions by the mid nineteenth century (3). While there is much speculation over the authorship of *The History of Constantius and Pulchera*, Duncan Faherty and Ed White suggest that because Coverly had active correspondence with local New England authors, they believe that one of the magazine’s subscribers composed the narrative (1).²

Although Coverly’s magazine was short-lived, lasting only a year and a half, it proved to be an important textual space for women writers and readers. Advertised at a mere shilling an issue, Coverly promised that *The Gentlemen and Ladies Town and Country Magazine* would feature the “latest discoveries, progress of Learning, and the most useful improvements in the Arts and Sciences; Husbandry, Gardening, Manufactures and Commerce” (qtd. in Richardson 352). However, Coverly’s magazine was less popular than its competition—Isaiah Thomas and Company’s more expansive and varied *Massachusetts Magazine*. Still, Coverly found a strong readership base in Bostonian women who desired to publish their prose and poetry. In fact, in the
publication’s concluding issue, Coverly printed a list of the magazine’s 471 subscribers, which were primarily middle-class women in the larger Boston area (Richardson 352).³

The documentary culture of Coverly’s magazine reveals a profound engagement with the culture of sentiment and sensibility. According to Lyon Norman Richardson, many of the texts published in the magazine fell within the genre of “sentimental romance,” in which “seducers…and ruined females” permeated the pages of many narratives, and where “love was…glorified…but seldom isolated from lust” (353). Stock images of “distress[ed]…hearts, bursting bosoms, silent signs, and the ‘hallowed flood’ of tears” gave women writers the necessary foundations for producing their sentimental stories and didactic thematics (Richardson 353). Indeed, most of the narratives published in The Gentlemen and Ladies Town and Country Magazine, such as the anonymously authored “The Wronged Wife” (1789), “Conjugal Infidelity Detected” (1789), and “The Two Sisters, or Lucinda and Leonora” (1789-90) offered formulaic reifications of womanly virtue and the dangers of seduction, demonstrating the editor’s careful attempts to weed out the dangerous from the acceptable.⁴

One such dangerous text was addressed in the April 1789 issue of the magazine. Coverly informed his readers that he and the publishers rejected a submission due to its salacious content. He writes: “We are sorry to reject W.Z. An Evening Excursion, as, it appears rather to corrupt, than to improve the Morals of our young readers” (qtd. in Richardson 353-54). Most intriguingly, The History of Constantius and Pulchera circumvents this level of scrutiny, and the text is instead hailed as an emblem of morality. For example, in the 1794 edition of the novella, the text is dedicated to “The Young Ladies of Columbia,” meant to “inspire the mind with fortitude under the most
unparalleled MISFORTUNES.” Moreover, the dedication champions the novella writer’s ability to “represent the happy consequences of VIRTUE and FIDELITY” (“Title Page”). Yet, this paratextual branding could potentially appear discordant with the narrative content and exposition of Constantius and Pulchera.

For readers unfamiliar with the novella, the narrative opens as a pastiche of Shakespearean drama, most notably appropriated from the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. Set in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pulchera, a charming and beautiful sixteen year old girl, laments her father’s refusal to allow her to marry her love, Constantius. Pulchera’s father has arranged her to marry Monsieur Le Monte, the son of a wealthy French nobleman. Constantius soon arrives, and he and Pulchera decide to flee Philadelphia and elope. However, Constantius is soon captured by a British impressment gang, and Pulchera is sent back to her father to await voyage to France to marry Le Monte. On her voyage, Pulchera is reunited with Constantius, who is a prisoner on the British ship. However, a massive storm soon destroys the ship, and Pulchera washes ashore on a deserted island, again separated from Constantius. Pulchera is soon rescued by Captain M. of an American privateer. However, pirates soon commandeer the ship. Before they arrive, Captain M. informs Pulchera to adorn men’s clothes and assume the alias of Lieutenant Valorus in order to avoid potential bodily harm.

The captors are convinced by the cross-dressing Pulchera, and the ship sets sail for Québec. However, a massive storm sinks the vessel, and all but three—Pulchera included—survive, and they seek shelter on a deserted island. There, the still cross-dressing Pulchera and her companions are forced to endure five feet of heavy snow
and the risk of potential cannibalism due to a lack of food. Luckily, a bear soon arrives, and they kill, skin, and eat it. Pulchera is soon rescued again, and she makes her way from London, Lisbon, and finally to France. There, Pulchera, still masquerading as Valorus, is informed that Le Monte and Constantius have become close friends, and that Constantius is to be wed to Le Monte’s sister because he believes Pulchera is dead. Pulchera, at the climax of the story, later reveals herself to Constantius, and the two are married. Le Monte and his sister are happy for the couple, and they hold no ill feelings toward them.

As inferred in this brief summation of *Constantius and Pulchera*, this romance novella is characterized by excess, extravagance, and overindulgence in narrative development. The novella, unlike any other cross-dressing narrative from the late eighteenth century, poses a unique problem for the history of early American sexualities in terms of its ability to use humor to simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant gendered ideology. For example, Phillip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro read early American cross-dressers, such as Deborah Sampson from Herman Mann’s *The Female Review* (1797) and Martinette de Beauvais from Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond* (1799), as figures who “reinforce narrative and gender” paradigms, while simultaneously illuminate “how easily the tenuous social conventions of sex-gender may be transgressed” in times of revolution (*Ormond* 335). Since the archive of early American cross-dressers emerges during the aftermath of the American Revolution, Barnard and Shapiro link these occurrences to transformed social and political conditions in the Atlantic world, which include rapid urbanization, industrialization, mercantilism and trade, and military expansion, which thus enabled the formation of an emergent
discourse on women’s rights and gender and social relations (336). In doing so, Barnard and Shapiro highlight the ways in which conceptions of cross-dressing, gender, and home identities coalesced during the early national period, enabling alternative forms and displays of gender and sexuality to flourish without totalizing regulation, castigation, and eradication.⁷

Moreover, many literary and cultural critiques have explored the radical potentials of female cross-dressing in eighteenth century narratives and the Revolutionary War period more broadly.⁸ For example, Sandra Gustafson explains that during this period (particularly the 1790s):

American writers evolved their own symbolic vesture for the cross-dressing female soldier, one woven of the disputed issues of political, economic, and gender identity. The exclusion of American women from the constitutionally established government converged with the French Revolution and the publication of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1782) to make the relationship between gender and citizenship in a republic a central cultural preoccupation in its own right, as well as a general figure for the problem of social order. (389)

Here, Gustafson presents a historicist reading of the “cross-dressing female soldier” as part of the deployment of a larger “symbolic” resistance to the American body politic, disrupting the “political, economic, and gender” configurations that comprise the social whole. For Gustafson and others, such as Heather Smyth, Daniel A. Cohen, Philip Barnard, and Stephen Shapiro, the eighteenth century female cross-dresser is temporally located in her symbolic mode of resistance and radicalism—her “symbolic vesture” is only licensed semiotic coherence when it is decoded in historically-contingent terms.⁹ According to this framework, then, the ideologies of the French Revolution, prompting “many women…[to use] societal turmoil…to foray into the masculine territory of politics,” and Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminist imagination
coalesced in society (and reflected in literature) to produce the figure of the female cross-dresser (Krimmer 38).

Katherine Binhammer echoes Gustafson’s reading, and extends it to consider the female cross-dresser’s relationship to the history of sexuality before the rise of sexology. She argues that the 1790s are an integral site for understanding sexuality as distinguished from sex because the decade saw an “increased public and political interest taken in female sexuality” (411). Furthermore, since the decade bore witness to a number of “pivotal philosophical, political, and social movements,” such as “the social enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality,” “the advancement of a concern with population control, and the invention of pornography,” the female cross-dresser emerges from the chaos of competing and clashing discourses (Binhammer 411). In her reading of Herman Mann’s *The Female Review* (1797)—a novel about a cross-dressing Revolutionary War soldier—Greta LaFleur argues that the author draws upon the vocabulary of “popular botany and sexual science” to produce an emergent discourse on the cross-dressing soldier’s (proto-homo)sexuality as linked to (eighteenth century) conceptions of gender (“Precipitous Sensations” 95). In doing so, LaFleur builds her argument about sexuality, science, literature, and cross-dressing within the historicist parameters of Binhammer’s project.

Central to these arguments, then, is an uncompromising understanding of cross-dressing as an act of radicalism and destabilization to the humorless Revolutionary War and its aftermath. While the critical approaches to theorizing cross-dressing have been addressed in terms of gender subversion, coded proto-lesbianism, and revolutionary patriotism, these paradigms must be extended to include depictions of humor,
exaggeration, and the ridiculous. Using *The History of Constantius and Pulchera* as the focal point of this chapter, I seek to amend and expand conceptions of early American cross-dressing to include the deployment of a camp sensibility and style, which is made legible through pastiche and parody—of pleasure and power in the implausibly absurd. In essence, I rethink the role of radicalism by exploring the text’s un-radical act of poking fun at one’s own claim to radicalism. To elucidate further, I use the novella as a way of theorizing the possibility of a queer aesthetic before the formation of queer subcultural communities and practices. This is done in order to demonstrate how the tools of queer theory can yield an alternative understanding of early American cross-dressing as part of a larger transhistorical continuum of queer culture making in terms of style, taste, and aesthetic gravitation.

**Early American Camp**

In order to build a theory of early American camp, we must first begin by differentiating camp from other forms of humor, exaggeration, and parody in literary studies. This is done in order to demonstrate how camp as a sensibility and style departs from other forms of reader-response experience, identification, and appropriation. To clarify, camp involves some—but not all—of the forms discussed in this theorization. To begin, satire is oftentimes confused or conflated with representational strategies of the superfluous and the ridiculous, appearing (on the surface level) to resemble qualities of a camp sensibility. If satire is a technique used for exposing and criticizing corruption through the deployment of irony and humor, then its literary medium, according to Paul Simpson, seeks to carry out three distinct functions:

Satire clearly has an aggressive function. It singles out an object of attack...Satire also has a social function...because inter-group bonds, in particular, are consolidated in 'successful' satire. Yet it also has...an
intellectual function because it relies upon linguistic creativity which extends the full resources of the system of language. (3)

To contextualize, Simpson attempts to create an understanding of satire as part of the humor continuum, emphasizing that its reception is made legible through associations to the quotidian or everyday forms of laughter and jest in language. Satire is also intentional and deliberate—it fuses language with order, complexity, and structure in order to create a discursive practice and dialog that is culturally specific and derived from resistance to ideology and ideological state apparatuses (institutional structures). Furthermore, satire follows a triadic structure in order for satirization to occur, requiring three distinct subjects, which include “the satirist (the producer of the text), the satiree (an addressee, whether reader, viewer or listener) and the satirized (the target attacked or critiqued in the satirical discourse)” (Simpson 8). In this light, satire is successful only when it upholds, reifies, and stabilizes the three relationships within the triad.

We see Simpson’s model of satire play out in studies of early American sexualities. Important to note, my interests in satire (and later farce) are primarily focused on sexual satire. There is a large body of work on early American satire—the work of the Connecticut Wits being the most discussed body in early republican literature.11 In his analysis of antimasonic satire and the sexual grotesque in a 1751 selection from the Boston Evening-Post, for example, Thomas A. Foster explains that caricature depictions of sodomy were used as polemical devices for slandering public officials and criticizing socio-political publics and counterpublics, thereby situating the eighteenth century political and the satirical as dependent upon one another for mobilization (“Antimasonic Satire” 172).12 In his analysis of the poetic column letter entitled “In Defence of Masonry,” Foster examines the multiple ways sodomy,
hyperbole, and the grotesque coalesce to produce a satirical critique of the freemasons society, which was a fraternal organization characterized by religious truth seeking and ancient and occult symbol appropriation used for explaining and exploring ethics and civic evolvement. For example, the anonymous poet, A-M-S-N, writes: “I’m sure our trunnels look’d as clean/As if they ne’re up A—se had been/For when we use ‘em, we take care/To wash ‘em well, and give ‘em Air/Then lock ‘em up in our own Chamber/Ready to trunnel the next Member/You see I have put our arms above/ To shew that we live in Love” (54). Through imaginings of bowel decompaction, defecation, and feminized anal penetration, the letter, according to Foster, uses the humor of proto-homoeroticism to distance the satiree (the reader of the newspaper) from the satirized (freemasons) by deploying illicit sex as the barrier to empathy and identification, thereby leaving the satirized vulnerable to critique.

Figure 3-1. “Trunil Him Well Brother.” The cartoon was published in The Boston Evening-Post on January 7, 1751. The engraving accompanies “In Defence of Masonry.”

At the same time, the satirist (John Hammock) reshapes sodomitical discourse by decentralizing its articulation from the discourses of religion and law. In its place, he
reimagines the discourse within the language and humor of the everyday—the lowbrow and the vulgar—in order to create a public imagination of sex, institutional practice, and corruption within amusing, albeit lewd, terms. Thus, satire functions as a mode of irony, ridicule, and mockery for the purposes of exploitation exposure and reveal within the language of the conversational and spoken.¹³

The concept of the vulgar within the definitional parameters for understanding satire must also be distinguished from farce.¹⁴ Whereas satire takes up exaggeration and irony to enable the unified triadic structure to fully expose the satirist to the satirized’s shortcomings and vices, thereby enabling the incitement to discourse, farce operates on the level of unadulterated entertainment and amusement. It mobilizes stock characters, implausible situations, extravagance, and slap-stick (most notably in drama and performance) for the purposes of popular consumption. Historically, according to Jessica Davis, farce has been situated as immature and embryonic, characterized by “cruder coincidences and…grosser pieces of joking…while the more sophisticated elements of plot, character and theme are those of comedy proper” (73). However aesthetically or intellectually elementary farce is deemed within dominant circles of academic criticism, it still incites meaning and use for the reader because of its ability to reframe depiction and representation within the wider un-public language of the abject and crude.

Scholarship in early American sexualities studies has recently begun to explore representations of farce and sexual vulgarity in eighteenth century print culture, most notably in colonial newspapers. For example, in her cultural history of rape and sexual power in early American society, Sharon Block recounts a 1769 story from the Virginia
**Gazette** in which “a man…planned to kidnap a young woman so that he could forcibly marry and rape her. When the woman’s brother discovered the plot, he dressed up in his sister’s clothes and let himself be kidnapped instead” (212). Through the deployment of irony, role-reversal, masquerade, and trickery, the news story, according to Block, transforms the “apocryphal anecdote” of patriarchal dominance and bodily violence into perverse humor manufactured for popular (almost tabloid-esque) consumption (213). In another example, Richard Godbeer examines a 1762 news release from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* which describes an unintentional “incestuous marriage between a tradesman in London and a woman who turned out to be the daughter of his estranged wife by a subsequent relationship” (*Sexual Revolution* 276). In both instances, farcical depiction is implemented to situate the sensational and the scandalous as a popular mode of entertainment and captivation.\(^{15}\)

As we move closer toward understanding what camp is, we must also critically engage with tropes of pastiche and parody, which are oftentimes characteristic elements of a camp style. Pastiche can be described as an intertextual device characterized by the imitation and appropriation of elements from a primary cultural artifact. This form of conglomerate imitation distinguishes itself from allusion in that it does not reference or assume shared knowledge, nor does it necessarily replicate or copy. While most literary critics, according to Ingeborg Hoesterey, understanding pastiche in terms of imitation—requiring “a pasticher who emulates the style of one writer or work”—the device can also be described as an “ideal form of creative critical activity,” in which the “writer [comes to grips] with the works of revered authors” (9). Echoing Hoesterey’s assertions, Aamir Mufti explains that pastiche is “hybridity or
mélange, but it is also imitation and citation. It is not merely the seemingly random juxtaposition of different discourses; it is also a repetition of something that went before” (327). For Mufti, pastiche uses irony to hail the original artifact into language, to establish its significance, and to then unexpectedly subvert its meaning. Thus, pastiche enters the realm of the dialogical, creating the conditions for intertextual exchange and cultural production.

Parody is also broadly conceived in terms of imitation. However, while pastiche is implemented for the purposes of adulation, parody takes up mimicry to produce a reflected vision of the subject or cultural artifact, usually for the purposes of trivializing its significance or position. Parody is also differentiated from satire in that its articulation rests on selective appropriation from the original for the imitative to be received as mockery (and thereby) scathing humor. By contrast, satire obfuscates imitation for the concept the artifact represents, exposing a corrupt idea or belief from the original for the purposes of social or cultural transformation. As Simon Dentith elucidates, parody “includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (9). Integral to Dentith’s understanding of the term is his use of “polemical” to describe the antagonistic modes of attack through which parody is scripted and realized—its form, function, and direction are in constant motion.

Also fundamental for comprehending parody is its place in history and function within discourses about modern sensibility. In A Theory of Parody, Linda Hutcheon explains that “because parody always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks,” its dual-structure not only lends itself to “authorized transgression,” but it also serves as
“an inscription of the past in the present…embody[ing] and bring[ing] to life actual historical tensions” (xii). While parody makes itself legible through “repetition” and “critical ironic distance,” it also has the ability to “engage history through…textual appropriation,” made legible through the revisionist’s “interventionist social agendas” (Hutcheon xii). In this light, parody moves closer to a modern sensibility in that it rejects a representation of the cultural object in temporal specificity. Instead, as Randolph C. Wheeler observes, parody as linked to the production of sensibility is realized when the “sensual elements…[and] the medium” produce (through appropriation) and “sustain…enjoyment,” translating—as opposed to constituting—the primary or “original” artifact into a dissolution of semiotic stability (98). Thus, parody and sensibility have the potential to remake and repurpose cultural life-worlds in and across history that surpass trivialization.

The crossroads between sensibility and parody reflect Susan Sontag’s fluid understanding of camp. In her landmark articulation, Sontag describes camp as a distinctly modern sensibility. Important to note, modern is used here to distinguish sensibility from its eighteenth century use, focusing on the multidimensional realms of subjectivity, including (but not limited to) the desires, aspirations, and values of the subject. For Sontag, camp is difficult to grasp as a concept or idea, but it can be adequately felt:

A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about; but there are special reasons why Camp, in particular, has never been discussed. It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love for the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even. (276)
Here, Sontag understands camp within the limits of culture. Because camp, according to Sontag, is imagined as a form of taste, it's traditionally relegated to the margins of the interpersonal or subjective. Thus, camp's significance is oftentimes diminished or excluded within wider discourses about cultural practice and form. In her understanding of camp as embracing and "lov[ing] the unnatural" through "artifice and exaggeration," Sontag explores the "esoteric" dimensions of the sensibility by examining the relationship between the subject and the cultural object.

Camp, according to Sontag, begins at the level of aestheticism, or modes of seeing. For the subject with a camp sensibility, the cultural object becomes camp through forms of dissociation. The subject detaches the object from its original historical and cultural context, and she or he creates meaning from that object through aesthetic evaluation and appraisal. Since camp is a taste, thereby subjective, the object's meaning is not uniform or fixed. Instead, the object can be imagined as hidden or cast out of sight. Until the subject with a camp vision brings that vision to bear on the cultural object, the object is not yet camp until it is recognized as such. As Sontag elucidates, "Camp is…a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons…[T]he Camp eye has the power to transform experience" (277). At the same time, however, Sontag notes that specific elements of the cultural object and its production contribute to the subject's appreciation of the object as camp, most notably qualities related to style, exaggeration, and artifice.

Sontag's milestone articulation is useful for fueling a theory of early American camp. Looking backward to recover forms of camp aestheticism in eighteenth century archives requires a thorough understanding of a period's sensibility, which is oftentimes
challenging to quantify or explain with the limits of language. This is especially pressing when we consider that the rise of an eighteenth century sensibility meant something thoroughly different than today’s imaginings. As Sontag usefully remarks, “The sensibility of an era is not only its most decisive, but also its most perishable, aspect. One may capture the ideas (intellectual history) and the behavior (social history) of an epoch without ever touching upon the sensibility or taste which informed those ideas, that behavior” (276). Here, Sontag’s observations resonate with dominant historicist accounts of eighteenth century sensibility, which are oftentimes framed as intellectual and social histories.

For example, in her recent book Sensibility and the American Revolution, Sarah Knott examines the contours of the newly formulated self, society, and state to expound a theory of sensibility, or rationality, in post-Revolutionary War America. For Knott, sensibility emerges as recognition of the duality between body and mind—a recognition of the self in society as it navigates through social and community relations (69). Sensibility, according to Knott, was a “cultural movement that celebrated the human capacity for sympathy and sensitivity to the world.” While Adam Smith acknowledges in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, for example, that “a man of sensibility may sometimes feel great uneasiness lest he should have yielded too much even to what may be called an honourable passion,” he ultimately demonstrates that the cultivation of principle, conscience, and reason—and the surmount of impulse—facilitates proper social direction (122). Indeed, the multivalent relationship between sentiment, sensibility, and empire, according to Knott, provided the conditions for the emergence of a transatlantic discourse on sensibility. For Knott, “the sentimental project” aided the new citizen in
creating a new form of government, one in which “national independence and social interdependence facilitated one another.” In examining the production of late eighteenth century sensibility, Knott locates a multitude of contributing factors to its development. In particular, pre-Revolutionary War America and the forceful endurance of colonialism provided the means through which transatlantic convergences (and equally divergences) could occur (23-6).

The move toward American independence enabled the formation of a series of communication networks in which the colonized subject began to differentiate her or his self from the colonizer. With the rapid transformation of transatlantic print culture in urban spaces like Boston and Philadelphia, the literature of sensibility flourished (Knott 16). In particular, Benjamin Rush’s theory of nerve conduits, connecting the body to the mind, proved especially influential to Americans for tangibly imagining the formation of a sensible self (91). In turn, this conceptual imagination amalgamated the rhetoric of moral responsibility and sensibility with the drive toward independence in order to produce the rationale behind colonial liberation. War—chaotic, irrational, and violent—was thus justified within the discourse on sensibility. With the formation of a distinct, metaphorical American body politic, sensibility and sentiment pervaded the national landscape, creating a conceptual bridge for understanding and negotiating conceptions of national belonging and the individual (16).

Knott’s intellectual history of revolutionary sensibility helps us to navigate through dominant and minority approaches to cultural signifiers, their signifieds, and their resignifications within wider discursive practices. To locate a camp aesthetic in eighteenth century society is not a process of historicizing tastes and correlative
behaviors. Rather, it is a mode of seeing cultural objects and appropriations in ways that seem odd, out of place, out of context, and incongruent with the dominant social and aesthetic visions of an evolving national body politic. Since camp is always already waiting to be discovered, the process for archiving a modern sensibility of excess, manifested through the remixing of shared taste, requires a transformative vision of originality into artifice and the intensely subjective. Indeed, because camp can only become camp through aesthetic appraisal—oftentimes elucidated through the deployment of pastiche and parody—its significance to American cultural history lies in its trajectory of finding, seeing, and (re)discovering, lending itself to tranhistoricism. A camp sensibility and style is approximate and unstable: it is felt instead of witnessed, and its oldness can become new in sensation and purpose.

Extending beyond Sontag’s notes, camp can also be imagined as both a political apparatus and a form of queerness. As Jack Babuscio notes, a camp sensibility is a “creative energy reflecting a [non-normative] consciousness.” Camp is a “heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from social” constraints, and it can be imagined as a “perception of the world which is colored, shaped, [and] directed” by one’s subject position (Babuscio 19). In the traditional realm of lesbian and gay studies that subject is a homosexual-in-excess who attaches a camp sensibility to a cultural object for the purposes of queer survival. In the case of this chapter, I take the incongruent subject to mean queerness-as-adjective across terrains of being and experience. Since the camp vision is highly subjective and interpersonal, its nascent articulation is in constant shift and flux. In this light, the concept of early American camp is important for understanding depictions of gender and sexuality in
historicized genre periodization, which we see illustrated in the aforementioned scholarly approaches to satire and farce. Early American camp has the potential to breach social formations through the collective and interpersonal realms of seeing and viewing in bent perspective, detaching cultural signifiers and signifieds from their predetermined significations within stable, discursive constructions of eighteenth century sensibility and the imagined body politic.

When we turn our attention to queer theorizations of camp, we gain a wider perspective about its deployment and use both transhistorically and across terrains of gendered embodiments and experiences. As such, queer interventions are particularly viable for theorizing the intersections between queerness, camp, and cross-dressing in the eighteenth century, reflected in and shaped by the aesthetic and cultural uses of *The History of Constantius and Pulchera*, which drive the remaining sections of this chapter. For David Halperin, camp “is a form of cultural resistance that is…predicated on a shared consciousness” of social exclusion and resistance to power, characterized by “parody, exaggeration, amplification, theatricalization, and literalization of normally tacit codes” (*Saint Foucault* 29). In the corpus of her scholarship on gender performativity, Judith Butler echoes the linkage between “cultural resistance” and camp, continually reflecting upon drag and cross-dressing’s use for critiquing heteronormativity and challenging the fiction of stable identity categories in the sex-gender system.

For Butler, camp as a subversive cultural practice garners its mobilization through forms of gesture and action, which she views as parody, that expose the normalization of the real as copy or imitation and sham, which she terms gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler remarks that “in imitating gender, drag
implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (364). Camp, then, enables the denaturalization of the sex/gender system “by means of a [drag] performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler 364). In Bodies that Matter, Butler revises her concept of gender performativity to consider the operatives of heterosexual privilege and power, reframing her earlier argumentative assumption that gender is drag. Yet, she still maintains that drag and camp have the potential to dispute “heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” through tactics of displacement (384). Echoing Butler, Esther Newton further elaborates upon the relationship between drag, gender, and camp in her book Margaret Mead Made Me Gay, clarifying that “camp usually depends on the perception or creations of incongruous juxtapositions” of deliberate representations-in-excess for the purposes of defiant and ironic reception (24). Yet, the forms of excess, dissonance, and incongruity that fuel camp’s association to drag, according to Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner, “are constituted against the backdrop of contemporary popular culture” (152). In turn, camp and drag are thus also constituted through “an appropriation of the conventions of [popular] spectacle…[such as] the random, eclectic…and….sensational,” creating a “hegemonic function of spectacle” (Shugart and Waggoner 152). These queer scholars together argue that camp exposes cultural practices as rooted and stagnated in the present. Thus, while the vast majority of camp theorists have a presentist bent, their definitions open up the possibility of detaching camp from modern and enabling us to reading camp and queer across time and space.
The presentist bent on queerness and camp offer viable opportunities for reconsidering the historiography of early American sexualities in terms of style. Yet, this turn has yet to occur in any substantial literary, historical, or cultural study of camp aestheticism. However, Andrew Britton, a film and media studies scholar, has made some strides in attempting to trace the culture of camp through the lens of economics and the emergence of capitalism. Although outside of an early Americanist context, he clarifies that “camp requires the frisson of transgression, the sense of perversity in relation to bourgeois norms which characterizes the degeneration of the Romantic impulse in the second half of the nineteenth century and which culminates in England with aestheticism and in France with the decadence” (379). For Britton, camp’s nascent articulation rests on periodization and the cultural conditions which enable its formation, recapitulating the scholarly impulse to negate camp’s existence outside of specific socio-historical markers and moments. For Britton, camp is unthinkable in eighteenth century America because “bourgeois psychology” had yet to be firmly codified (379).

In order to address this historiographical skepticism, it is also beneficial to think about early American camp as a queer method. In her innovative essay “Sex and ‘Unsex’: Histories of Gender Trouble in Eighteenth Century North America,” Greta LaFleur argues that queer theory has the potential to be used as a method for archiving early American genders and sexualities. She writes:

[My objective is to] theorize the possibility of transhistorical similarities as distinct from continuities in the historiography of gender, and to consider the implications of shifting the terms of the “alterity versus continuity” debates that have emerged out of queer theory and queer historiography toward a hermeneutics of similarity instead. Rather than assuming, or outright rejecting, the possibility of historical continuities between eighteenth-century and present-day cultural awarenesses of the constitutive instability of gender, what might be gained, or what new
questions might we ask ourselves, by committing to a methodology akin to Clifford Geertz’s ‘thick description,’ wherein we note historio-cultural similarities without narrativizing them in a way that would assure their interrelation or continuity? (473)

Here, LaFleur offers an important intervention into the historicist and un-historicist debates foregrounded in the introduction to this dissertation. By turning our attention to methodology, LaFleur establishes the study, analysis, and interpretation of early American genders and sexualities as a process of understanding and unfolding social worlds as interrelated networks of significance, which precipitate the unyielding drive toward knowledge. Instead of viewing eighteenth century genders and sexualities as sites of continuity or outright dissimilarity, LaFleur urges the early Americanist to observe elements of relatability without delving (or perhaps devolving) into grand narrative formation. In turn, a “hermeneutics of similarity” allows us to view sexuality’s past as a site of discovery, innovation, and flexibility.  

Analogous to the theory early American camp, a queer aesthetic is unstable and it is in constant flux. To trace a queer aesthetic in early America is not to locate an access point through which we find subcultural practice in absolute linear continuity. For example, it would be erroneous to argue that cross-dressing and drag are camp equivalents in past and present conceptions of LGBTQ, or that the cross-dressing Pulchera is best viewed as precursor to later drag kings. Rather, camp as a sensibility and style holds transhistorical significance in the ways we do the history of sexuality, disrupting encoded power relations of past and present discovery and knowability. If sexuality’s meaning is created through complex discursive networks, characterized by exchange, adaption, and reformulation, we can begin to view camp early American camp as a project of mutual reciprocity—understanding queer taste and aesthetics
across time. This contemporary moment of writing a transhistorical study of camp helps us to understand our own queer sensibilities and styles in less totalizing and fully knowable ways.

In other words, early American camp is a mode of seeing past aesthetics and styles as “off” or “out of place.” These aesthetics and styles disobey the republican body politic through displays of artifice, exaggeration, parody, and pastiche, and they enable a politics of ridiculousness, which is both felt and seen. In the present, early American camp incites both meaning and use for contemporary queer subjects with different camp visions because past queer styles and aesthetics are always on the precipice of being imminently discovered in the present. Newness is always a possibility. As Jay Prosser notes, camp is “a form of queer deconstruction, not simply inverting the opposition between the original and the copy, the referent and the repetition but creating…a third space” (25). This “third space” is queerness-as-method, fueling my theoretical reading of camp and the early American cultural object—the cross-dressing tale of Constantius and Pulchera.

The Subversion of Romance and the Pleasures of Parody

To begin a theorization of camp and queerness in The History of Constantius and Pulchera first requires an examination of the “heterosexual” romance plot’s ironic reconfiguration and displacement through the text’s deployment of Shakespearean parody. In Shakespeare’s infamous tragedy Romeo and Juliet (1597), the title female protagonist is urged by her tyrannical father, Lord Capulet, to enter into an arranged marriage with Count Paris, who is an affluent aristocrat. However, Juliet is still in love with the passionate Romeo, and the tensions between the Capulet’s and Montague’s continues to escalate until the dramatic sequence of events reaches its dénouement. In
the beginning of *Constantius and Pulchera*—analogous to the narrative arc of *Romeo and Juliet*—the lovelorn female protagonist laments her father’s refusal to allow her to marry Constantius. He demands that she marries Monsieur le Monte, the “only son and heir to a rich nobleman in France” (6). Since Pulchera is not allowed to see Constantius, she deduces that her father either assassinated or banished him. She wildly cries out, “Oh! The effusion of extacy of that happy moment, the soft remembrance of which serves no other purpose, than to plant daggers in my distracted bosom. Why should a father be lost to every tender feeling, and tear me instantaneously from the summit of happiness, and place me in the focus of torment” (5). Here, the language of sentiment permeates Pulchera’s lamentation, emulating the syntactic structure and word choice patterns of eighteenth century didactic/sentimental novels in the (conservative) British literary tradition, such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740).21 Ironically, the lamentation and mounting dramatic tension are abruptly diffused, disarticulated, and underscored by the immediate and haphazard arrival of Constantius. His appearance also signals the death of sentimental language in the novella and a jarring textual reconfiguration of defiant excess and exaggeration.

The sudden revocation of the language of feeling in *Constantius and Pulchera* is significant for remapping the parameters of romance, courtship, and marriage, thereby enabling the formation of a camp sensibility to emerge. Important to note, I’m not arguing that all elements of the seduction plot are absent. In fact, the trope of the revolution against patriarchal authority is very much present in Pulchera’s appeal for a sentimental benevolent father—a theme diffuse in both progressive and conservative novels of the era. The novella incites a call for disobedience to the parent, which
illustrates the tension between suffering the ill effects of absent or overly authoritative parents, and demanding appropriately sentimental/virtuous Republican parents, who lead virtuously by example rather than through power, fear, or tyranny, as the sentimental novels adapt to the power shift away from monarchial authority in the wake of revolution. Yet, at the same time, the dangers of Pulchera’s potential seduction are obfuscated and allowed to disappear, and the female reader is left amused and entertained without the presence of targeted didactic language. The History’s correlative divesture of true (sentimental) womanhood and romance is made legible through the narrative abridgement of the full courtship plot. Pulchera’s lamentation and the narrative’s refusal to make legible that lamentation as a marker of sentiment and sensibility create the conditions for the pleasures of unstable normative sexuality, licensed through parody, to take full effect for the reader. What authorizes readers to see the scene as parody and to take pleasure in artificial sentiment is the narrative’s self-aware and (seemingly) haphazard turn away from its serious, didactic “purpose,” which is usually necessitated through the trials and tribulations of courtship.

The effects of parody as part of the deployment of a camp aesthetic are further facilitated through other forms of Shakespearean appropriation in excess. For example, Constantius attempts to rescue Pulchera from her tyrannical father and the imminent threat of voyaging to France to marry Le Monte in an image reminiscent of Romeo wooing Juliet in the famous balcony scene in the Capulet’s orchard. With Pulchera standing over her chamber terrace—“forty feet high” (6)—in such languishing distress, Constantius “communicated the end of...[a] rope to Pulchera, who disengaged it from the oar, made it fast to one of the banisters of the terrass, by which means she
descended, though the knot by which she made the rope fast slip before she had got to the ground,” falling to the ground (7). In this all-important gesture, made evident through physical humor, the romance narrative is quashed and the historical homage to *Romeo and Juliet* is trivialized to the point of artificial mawkishness. Similar to the ways tears and cries of distress propel the performance of female virtue in the early republic, the moments of un-utopian or un-idyllic normative romance in *The History* propel the reader to look in bent perspective—this perspective is the camp vision.

Yet, in order to understand how *Constantius and Pulchera* can be read as part of a camp (or bent) way of seeing and discovery, it is beneficial to examine how the novella can be viewed in (playfully) straight vision. Since the popular novella went through at least fourteen editions by the mid nineteenth century, publishers made use of distinct paratext to effectively re-brand and re-market their product (text) as new and to also guide reader expectations and suggest interpretations. As Janine Barchas notes:

> The extra-narrative pages of graphic design—the ‘paratext’ of frontispieces, subscription lists, table of contents, title pages, indexes dedications, so-called ‘puffs,’ and the like—reflect and refract deep tensions in the eighteenth century between appearances and reality, form and content, between generic assertions and genuine truth claims. (20)

Paratext, then, can be imagined as a “threshold” that demarcates “inside” versus “inside,” or an attempt to exercise authority over a text’s meaning before the process of reading-to-reception even occurs (Richardson 12). For example, the frontispiece from the 1801 New York edition published by John Tiebout prominently features the distressed Pulchera leaning over her chamber terrace, while Constantius stands below, holding his heart and assuming the role of the hero.
In this visual representation, the text’s parody of Romeo and Juliet is obfuscated and pastiche is licensed as truth. As a result, the frontispiece attempts to erase the parody and replace it with familiar visual markers of sentimental romance.

The drive toward reading the novella in rigid gendered and sexual terms—in line with the tropes and discourses of the seduction narrative—is also illustrated in the small body of conservative scholarship on the text. In Revolution and the Word, for example, Cathy Davidson offers a conventional reading of The History's simultaneous authorization and rejection of women’s agency, desire, and power:
The narrative transvestism...does not overtly challenge the status quo, and that consideration may well explain the ‘secret’ to the novel’s success. The heroine rushes from harrowing adventure to even more harrowing adventure, but she does so ‘innocently’ because, ostensibly, she proceeds in opposition to her own more proper [female] desires. (273)

Eve Tavor Bannet echoes Davidson’s reading. She argues that while *The History* is an exciting tale about a “cross-dressing heroine” and “dangerous transatlantic adventures,” the text nevertheless reifies republican ideals about womanhood and “constancy” and submission to patriarchal authority (196). In *The Transformation of Authorship in America*, Grantland S. Rice argues that the novella was “ostensibly written for republican daughters,” while at the same time it was “about them” (158). Thus, he implicitly infers the text’s latent socio-political didacticism, which is emblematic of eighteenth century textual production and (totalizing) reception. Finally, Jared Gardner infers that *Constantius and Pulchera* established a precedent “for the American novel as the necessary protector of the female reader’s virtue” (23). Essentially, they see the novel as teaching female readers to feel the right ways. In all four examples, *Constantius and Pulchera*’s narrative structure and development facilitates the turn backward to heteronormativity and the didactic thematics of sentimental fiction, such as the dangers of illicit sex and seduction, and the imagined profile of the female reader.

Most interestingly, the paratextual shifts and framings in editions of the novella offer keen insight into the ways didacticism and romance were set aside to market the novella’s light humor. For example, in the aforementioned 1794 edition of the novella published in Boston, the editors include a dedication to “the young ladies of Columbia,” emphasizing the text’s use for moral instruction (“Misc. Front Matter”). Ironically, the editors then state in the “Preface”:
GRIEVED that such a piece of work should rest in oblivion, we have endeavored to make it as publick as possible. The thirst of the Ladies for Entertainment, we doubt not will excite them to compensate for our trouble...When Politicks become in general vogue among all nations, we consider not that the Ladies are destitute of Entertainment...[H]ow much better then would it be were we firm in mind, respecting Politicks, whilst acting for the Amusement of the FAIR SEX...[W]e flatter ourselves that...[Constantius and Pulchera] will meet with their liberal patronage. Its being an American composition must render it still more valuable...The repeated misfortunes of PULCHERA will cause the tear of Sensibility to fall upon the cheek of the Fair, whilst...it affords them a peculiar force of Amusement. (v-vii)

Here, the “Preface” is characterized by contradiction. While the text quenches the “thirst of the Ladies for Entertainment,” it nevertheless causes the “tear of Sensibility to fall upon the cheek of the Fair.” In these jarring shifts in feeding a thirst for sensation, the text’s paratext affords an opportunity for the display of proper sentimental affect, such as tears of virtue for the heroine. Since The History cannot escape the American body politic’s demand to “respect” its “Politicks,” Constantius and Pulchera can act “for the Amusement of the FAIR SEX” only when its amusement is appropriate to the gendered sensibilities of the nation and its principles of belonging and participation. Yet, even as the paratext reticently admits, the novella “affords” women “a peculiar force of Amusement” that lies in-between (or perhaps more aptly stated—outside) the appropriate markers of light reading and reception. Thus, the paratext’s inability to explain The History’s “peculiar” entertainment, in addition to the “incongruous juxtapositions” (to invoke Esther Newton’s language) of authorial purpose and use, forms the conditions for a camp sensibility and style to flourish (Newton 24).

In fact, in later eighteenth century editions of Constantius and Pulchera the paratext is removed or de-stylized, illustrating publishers’ inability to reframe the text’s discourse within wider thematics about reading as a means of consolidating early
American female virtue. In addition, the title of the novella is also altered, illustrating the text’s moral ambiguities and awkward or unexplainable content. While the 1794 edition refers to the work as *The History of Constantius & Pulchera, or Constancy Rewarded: An American Novel*, later editions, such as the 1795 edition printed by T.C. Cushing, for example, conspicuously drop the subtitle *An American Novel*. We can playfully read into this removal or absence to infer the perhaps un-American qualities of *The History*’s narrative exposition and cult of feeling (where one’s cross-dressing maritime escapades may not be acceptable—no matter how patriotic you are).

Furthermore, book catalogs and other publisher documents from the period also reveal queer attitudes toward the novella. For example, Joseph Nancrede’s 1796 *Catalogue of Books in the Various Branches of Literature* markets *Constantius and Pulchera* as simply “an interesting story” (30). In the 1798 edition of the novella printed by Charles Peirce in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the title is placed below the caption: “A beautiful little NOVEL” (“Title page”). In both examples, the fragmentary descriptions and uses of “interesting” and “beautiful” are trivialized to the point of incomprehensibility.

In this light, the historically contingent framing and reframing of *The History* reveal how the text appeared out-of-place and out-of-time for the period, fueling a transhistorical vision of camp to be cast just-in-sight. Yet, this transhistorical vision is characterized and marked by contradiction in interpretation. On the one hand, publishing companies and other literary venues from the period marketed *Constantius and Pulchera* in generic terms to repackage entertainment in (supposedly) new ways, producing multiple editions and reprints to meet the demands of consumers. On the other hand, literary and historical scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries
continually emphasize the novella’s politics without thoroughly considering what drove the early American consumer’s desire for consumption. For example, Sandra Gustafson argues that “this immensely popular novel translates the topoi of the woman warrior ballad into the picaresque tale” (390). Here, Gustafson is building off of Cathy Davidson’s scholarship in *Revolution and the Word*, understanding the “picaresque” as a form that countered the drive to “homogenize the polis with a rambunctious heterogeneity,” achieved through the masking of a “political agenda” (Davidson 235). By contrast, Matthew Garrett explores how the “quite popular” *Constantius and Pulchera* typifies the “narrative form and evident sociopolitical ambition” in the early republic (95).

In both examples, politics is prioritized and humor is eliminated from the critical discourse. Thus, the tensions and inconsistencies between literary history, its representation, and its re-representation in scholarship are fragmented in the curious case of *Constantius and Pulchera*, enabling camp’s queerness to exist beyond the borders of periodization and specificity.

The campish, anti-“heterosexual,” and parodic elements in the novella are made evident through the artificial channels of romance and re-approximation. In fact, the concept of the border is a useful metaphor for explaining the muddying or blockading of normative “heterosexual” romance in *The History*. After Constantius is captured by the British impressment gang during the failed elopement, Pulchera (forced by her father) and Le Monte set sail to France to marry. The French ship is soon commandeered on its voyage, and a surprising coincidence occurs:

The Captain and some of his principal officers, together with Le Monte and Pulchera, were carried on board the Commandant’s ship; but what was the surprise of Pulchera, when on board of the captor she beheld her lost Constantius! Nor were the sensations of Constantius less nervous at
beholding his adorable Pulchera—They both stood silent, swallowed up in extacy, while their expressive countenances declared the emotions of their hearts more intelligibly than the most finished composition of words is capable of doing. (11)

Here, the moment of Constantius reuniting with Pulchera is significant for its artifice. In a moment of shared sentimental reciprocity, where the gendering of feeling is queered through mutual “sensations,” the transatlantic journey becomes a formulaic and repetitious continuum of re-announcement and re-approximation—it is a voyage to nowhere.25 The narrative’s cyclical absurdity is placed in stark contrast to other gendered transatlantic narratives from the period, most notably Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791), where the title heroine is seduced by Montraville, mid-voyage to America. While in Rowson’s novel the transatlantic is linked to rape, seduction, and the severing of parental ties/sentiments—the transatlantic voyage as the space where women “fall”—The History uses the recurrent nature of maritime voyage to displace a thorough critique of patriarchy. When normative intimacy and monogamous coupling is cast in sight, channeled through the consistent announcement of the “heart’s” “expressive…emotions,” the intimacy fails to materialize into a history of Constantius and Pulchera’s love for one another. While Paul Giles argues that “romantic sentiment is correlated with, and verified by, the ritual of transatlantic crossing,” his position is limiting because it fails to explain the text’s predetermined narrative arc, which is circular in structure (26). In the peculiar world of the novella, the love between the two title protagonists is static and superficial, remarked but unseen, characterized by (seemingly) endless separation and meeting. The protagonists’ lovelorn anguish functions as a parody of sentimental suffering because that suffering will continuously replicate itself in unremarkable and expected fashion.
However, the narrator’s elucidation that the couple’s love for one another is less spoken than experienced, and more so, experienced as “exstasy,” serves as integral site for viewing a camp sensibility in bent perspective. In *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Pamela Robertson argues that camp “as an activity and a sensibility…foregrounds cross-sex and cross-gender identifications,” facilitating a discourse on intersection and difference (9). She takes up the term “feminist camp” in order to “reclaim a female form of aestheticism, related to female masquerade…that articulates and subverts the ‘image- and culture-making’ processes to which women have been traditionally been given access (9). Drawing upon Alexander Doty’s scholarship on “queerness” in film, media, and popular culture, Robertson argues that “queer” can function as a compliment to “feminist camp” in that it connotes “a discourse or position at odds with the dominant symbolic order, the flexibility and mobility of which helps to account for overlap among…points of view” (10). In the case of *Constantius and Pulchera*, the displacement of romance also displaces the “symbolic order” of womanhood to which conceptions of nationhood in the early republic were built upon. This displacement provides “flexibility and mobility” in subject position, in which the romancer (supposedly Constantius) and the romanced (supposedly Pulchera) are removed from predetermined social roles. Indeed, cross-dressing is not just limited to clothing choice. The turbulent Atlantic Ocean metaphorically functions as blockade, border, or hindrance, washing away didacticism and increasing the flow of “cross-gender identifications” toward heroics and sentimentalism, authorizing the parody of romantic excess to take full effect.
Thus, when Pulchera is again separated from Constantius after the tempest destroys the ship, we can spiritedly read into this occurrence as the moment where camp and cross-dressing are on the precipice to coalesce, converge, and vitalize a queer aesthetic and sensibility. As Pulchera washes ashore on the deserted island:

[T]he storm had subsided...the air was serene...and every appearance seemed calculated to inspire the bosom with pleasing sensations; but all these circumstances had no delights for Pulchera—a fixed gloom occupied her countenance, and the most melancholy sensations rent her distressed breast. (13)

Here, Pulchera's “countenance” is discordant with the jovial and cheery qualities of the environment. In a moment before pirates and cross-dressing preoccupy the narrative’s rapid unfolding, the image of Pulchera’s “melancholy” and absence of “delight[s]” builds toward an aesthetic of sentimental womanhood. As Marianne Noble notes, “Sentimentality exploits the pain of...[the] ontological wound; ironically, allusions to loss in the genre function as a unifying mechanism” (66). Since Pulchera is supposed to embody the defining principles of “true womanhood” in the newly formed republic, characterized by “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” her suffering is (in actuality) demanded of her, similar to the case of Eliza in The Coquette, as part of the performance of virtue (Cogan 65). However, Pulchera’s suffering, cutting open the painful “ontological wound,” is artifice in intention and depiction. The moment when “the most melancholy sensation” pervades her “distressed breast” is the precise moment at which sensation and overflowing excess intensify the narrative’s ridiculousness in the un-radical revolutionary politics of Pulchera’s cross-dressing.

Cross-Dressers, Queers, and Camp

Although most of the second half of The History concerns and details Pulchera’s cross-dressing maritime adventures, the text only describes the title hero/heroine’s re-
gendered dress once in the narrative. At all other times, the characters Pulchera encounters (puzzlingly) appear thoroughly convinced by her seemingly elaborate masquerade, which is suspicious considering she has few to no resources to make her disguise believable. Nevertheless, after Captain M—of a New York privateer rescues Pulchera from the deserted island, pirates soon attack and commandeer the ship. As the bandits approach the vessel:

Capt. M. advised Pulchera, in order to escape any ill usage from their captors to divest herself of women’s apparel, and attire herself in a suit of his which she accordingly did, putting on a neat suit of red regimentals, a gold-laced hat, and a sword by her side, and took upon her the character of a lieutenant, under the name of VALORUS. (14)

On the one hand, Capt. M’s statement to Pulchera about cross-dressing to “escape any ill usage” serves as subtle allusion to potential rape. On the other hand, the matter-of-fact and ordinary/everyday language and tone of Pulchera “putting on a neat suit,” “hat,” and “sword by her side” signals an opportunity for alternative (modern) sensibilities, styles, and aesthetics about cross-dressing to flourish, enabling a transhistorical camp vision. Since works of eighteenth century American fiction rarely (if ever) offer comprehensive depiction of bodies—with the notable exception of the anonymously authored The Hapless Orphan (1795)—the reader is licensed the ability to imagine how to cross-dress, who else cross-dressed (men too?), how cross-dressing felt, and why someone cross-dressed (beyond the text’s narrative occurrences). In this light, Valorus and the reader engage in an aesthetic exchange, producing a queer sensibility about gender that reaches beyond the text.

While I argue this queer sensibility is made legible through the humorous, ridiculous, and the absurd, Beth Fowkes Tobin and Matthew Garrett have recently drawn attention to (and problematized) the early Americanist hesitancy to theorize
cross-dressing, gender, and sexuality outside of historicist paradigms. In his 2014 publication *Episodic Poetics*, Garrett centralizes *The History* within wider academic debates about early American literary history and theory. According to Garrett, scholars of the eighteenth century American novel situate texts as “*either reproducing* dominant ideologies or, in their most secret ways, *resisting* the social inequality of the early republic through the expression of mourning for the radical spirit” (114). However, these novels “enable a hesitation before these weighty questions, and if there is a purely ideological moment in this form, it must lie in the politics of hesitation itself, in the pleasures of *constancy*” (Garrett 114). Here, Garrett’s use of “hesitation” and the delayed “ideological moment” create a rupture in understanding text within context.

When we extend his analysis to Pulchera’s masquerade or disguise, we can view the ways “cross-dressing, with its mimicry and potential for parody, is not always subversive or counterhegemonic” (Tobin 90). Pulchera is not a product (or byproduct) of ideology. Rather, she can be imagined as a figure of delay. Pulchera stands in for an aesthetic of difference, unremarked but felt, and a sensibility of excess, waiting to be discovered within the realms of camp’s (always imminent) appearance.

The excesses of Pulchera’s cross-dressing masquerade come into full effect toward the latter end of the narrative. Following the mutiny and separation of lovers, Valorus and her captors, “a sloop of war from Portsmouth, bound to Quebec,” soon face (yet another) deadly tempest, and the ship is destroyed (15). Only Pulchera and three (presumable) sailors “had the surprising good fortune to escape a watery tomb” (15), and they wash ashore on a deserted island where they face potential starvation and
unpredictable weather, most notably “four or five feet” of snow (17). Out of desperation, Pulchera is chosen for cannibalistic consumption when a surprising coincidence occurs:

> [W]hen one of...[Valorus’] woeful partners took up the fatal gun, well loaded...and was just...[about to pull] the trigger...a Bear [was discovered] wallowing in the snow—He exclaimed ‘Valorus! Thank God you may yet live!’ and discharged his piece at the Bear...of which he died instantly.—If ever joy was to excess, it was then so amongst this little unfortunate company—Valorus whom they both loved equal to themselves, was still alive—without going to their prey, they both fell upon him, embracing him as one from the dead, and the most tender, expressive congratulations passed on the occasion—they all seemed lost in extacy for some space of time. (19)

The cyclical nature of the maritime and climatological occurrences enables the text to spiral into absurdity and implausibility (the weather is chaotic and makes no sense). Pulchera’s masquerade as Valorus is analogous to this irrationality and ludicrousness, falling within the terrain of artifice. The bear incident highlights the incongruity of the Pulchera/Valorus dichotomy, illustrating how the male gaze of her comrades is misfired in humorous fashion. In fact, the language of the text leaves ambiguous what body they were falling upon and devouring: the bear’s body, or the male body. Instead of disguise operating to subversive effect, Pulchera as Valorus—and vice versa—becomes a mode of self-parody, enabling readers to reframe their sensibilities for engaging in the pleasures of superfluous gender and incognito cross-dressing. When the gang of castaways “seemed lost in extacy for some space of time,” we can friskily imagine the lighthearted and blithe delights of the text and the reader engaging in a reciprocal relationship of unbound (and exaggerated) satisfaction.

If camp’s appearance is always already waiting to be discovered, we must fully theorize its arrival or presence in terms of The History’s use of gender, parody, and (proto-militaristic) cross-dressing. As Judith Butler elucidates in Gender Trouble,
“Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and re-circulated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (139). In Constantius and Pulchera, the “parodic repetitions” of Pulchera’s passing through maritime parades of flaunted excess—coupled with the text’s circular narrative elements—may at once emit seemingly transgressive energies, but which nevertheless reinforce prevailing systems of power and control. In this light, the text can be viewed as campy and not subversive. As Beth Tobin rightfully argues, the critical discourse in queer studies about “mimicry, masquerade, and parody” rests on the assumption that these practices are contingent upon an “oppressed subject position…[that is] trying to subvert the dominant order” (90). In addition, if camp, according to Judith Halberstam, “is predicated on exposing and exploiting the theatricality of gender, [then] it tends to be the genre for an outrageous performance of femininity…rather than outrageous performances of masculinity” (Female Masculinity 237). While Halberstam is addressing the ways masculinity is naturalized as non-performative in drag king cultures, her commentary is instrumental for exploring the (decidedly) non-butch, which is linked to the non-radical, qualities to Pulchera’s masquerade, made evident through the text’s hyperawareness of its own ridiculousness and blatant use of parody and pastiche.

For all of Pulchera’s eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, her queerness does not necessarily lie fixed in gender performance, but rather through the semiotic excesses of her passing: everyone, from her lover to the buccaneers, fails to read through her disguise. Pulchera’s queer aesthetic is brought to life through the interrelations between
the text and the reader reading in bent perspective, producing a camp vision that extends across genders, sexualities, and other transhistorical markers of being and seeing. This alternative approach to the un-radical radicalness of Pulchera’s cross-dressing enables a more inclusive and collective politics of camp that may, for instance, be thought of as a form of lesbian camp or straight camp. The viewer (or rather, the reader) discovers the modern sensibility, and her or his subject position and form of embodiment is fluid—not predetermined or immobile. As Halberstam frustratingly remarks, “In some accounts, camp becomes an essentially gay male aesthetic” (*Female Masculinity* 237). Yet, if we turn to revisions of the landmark “Notes on Camp,” we can see, as José Esteban Muñoz explains in *Disidentifications*, that Susan Sontag was “interested in explaining how camp was…more than just a homosexual phenomenon. This universalizing gesture elided with the issue of how other minority communities might enact a camp discourse in favor of how (white) heterosexuals could develop a camp sensibility” (212). Echoing Muñoz’s assertions and championing forms of collectively, David Halperin persuasively contends that “Camp is about deflating pretention, dismantling hierarchy, and remembering that all queers are stigmatized and no one deserves the kind of dignity that comes at the expense of someone else’s shame” (*How to be Gay* 207). In this light, early American camp holds use and meaning to not only lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and otherwise queer archives, archivists, and interpreters, but to broader terrains and fields that extend the use of gender and sexuality across other areas of inquiry.

The concluding narrative arc of *Constantius and Pulchera* demonstrates the contributing elements of early American camp seen and felt in the novella. When
Pulchera (still masquerading as Valorus) arrives to France, she encounters Constantius and is informed of his forthcoming marriage to Le Monte’s sister. Pulchera, afraid to reveal her true identity to Constantius, writes an anonymous letter to him, explaining that his long-lost-love is still alive and that she will be “at the sign of the Eagle at half past four” (26). When Constantius arrives,

He asked the hostess if there were any commands for him? She answered, that in the chamber parlour was a young gentleman waiting for you, if your name is Constantius, that is my name replied he—she shewed him the way to the room, which he entered—but heavens, what a surprise was he seized with, when he instead of a young gentleman, found his eyes fixed on his adorable PULCHERA; decked in all the magnificence which the city of Bordeaux could afford—she rose in the most graceful manner to receive him, such a sweetness was in her countenance, as could not fail of ravishing the heart of the most stupid beholder, her eyes acquired additional lustre, as they met those of her long wished for Constantius, whose surprise was so great, that his organs of speech were totally incapable…to perform their functions. (27)

On the one hand, Pulchera’s perpetual masquerade as Valorus and series of secret letters to Constantius could be interpreted as a form of queer embodiment and resistance to the naturalized gendered order. Pulchera’s secrecy and masquerade is can be described as a politics of hesitancy—she desires to deceive heteronormativity while taking pleasure in her masked, queer identity. On the other hand, the exacerbated and exaggerated articulations of Pulchera’s feminine “magnificence,” “graceful manner,” and “sweet…countenance” reinscribes her gendered identity as woman. She is no longer caught in-between roles. Yet, these textual conflicts raise important questions about the spectrum of Pulchera’s femininity and/or masculinity, fluctuating drastically as the mode of seeing shifts (even though she has the power and agency to decide who sees). Yet, the space of ambiguity in The History enables a queer aesthetic and sensibility to flourish in its refusal to make a patriarchal/political critique fully
realized. Instead of viewing the novella as a failed queer text that reinforces heterosexuality and marriage, we need to look at the text as an artifact of early American camp that relishes in divide and indecisiveness, taking pleasure in the absurdity and incongruity of gendered, erotic, and social life.

As I’ve argued throughout this chapter, early American camp offers a transhistorical vision of queerness that does not begin with a predetermined association to homosexuality. Early American camp offers a fluid imagination about eighteenth century American tastes, aesthetic gravitations, and appetites. While perhaps my theorization of *Constantius and Pulchera* is bent toward my own queer subject position, early American camp nevertheless breaches subject formation and hails (modern) sensibility as a collective marker of alternative backward glances. These glances, bent in perspective, help us reread radicalism and resistance to nation, belonging, and social expectation in seemingly non-threatening—though paradoxically menacing—ways. Indeed, sometimes humor is threatening in the artifice of a non-threatening threat.

**Notes**

1 While the term “romance” has been subject to debate in eighteenth century studies of the novel, I use it, following Pierre Daniel Huet’s definition, to include “fictions of amorous exploits written in Prose with artistry, for the pleasure and edification of their readers” (qtd. in Aravamudan 37).

2 Although the first printing of the narrative was titled *The Story of Contantius and Pulchera*, I refer to the text in this chapter as *The History of Contantius and Pulchera* because of its widespread use in later editions and in early American literary and historical scholarship.

3 For further information on women writers in eighteenth century America, see Merril D. Smith’s *Women’s Roles in Eighteenth-Century America* and Sharon Harris’s anthology *American Women Writers to 1800*.

4 While no contemporary literary scholarship exists on these texts, Mark Kamrath and Sharon Harris’s *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth-Century America* is a useful reference for understanding the relationship between gender, literacy, and authorship during the Revolutionary period.

5 In his recent book *The Historical Origins of Terrorism in America: 1644-1880*, Robert Kumamoto explains that impressment was a common practice in British North America, defined by the “forcible conscription of men with notice into naval service.” During times of war, Kumamoto observes, “British
ships...[would] pull into...ports, where press gangs would be sent ashore to round up new ‘recruits’” as old as 45 and as young as 18 (26).

6 See Louise Françoise de Houssay’s A Narrative of the Sufferings (1796) as an example of a text about a female cross-dressing solider outside of an American context.

7 Also see Joe Fichtelberg’s Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870 and his discussion of the early nineteenth century “Female Marine” pamphlets about Almira Paul/Lucy Brewer’s “passing” as men. According to Fichtelberg, The War of 1812 introduced a different attitude towards cross dressing as an allegory or theory for how to navigate an unstable mercantile economy, in addition to the practice serving as a source of national pride and a reinscription of virtue.

8 There is little, if any, scholarship about male cross-dressing in eighteenth century America (Foster, “Sexual Diversity in Early America” 128). However, there is a wealth of scholarship about cross-dressing in British molly houses during the same period. See, for example, Rictor Norton’s Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830.

9 See, for example, Smyth’s “Imperfect Disclosures’: Cross-Dressing and Containment in Charles Brockden Brown’s Ormond,” Barnard and Shapiro’s Hackett edition of Brown’s Ormond with related texts, and Cohen’s edited edition of The Female Marine and Related Works.

10 Outside of a specific early Americanist context, other important texts on cross-dressing and revolution include Vern L. Bullough’s Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender, Peter Stallybrass’s The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, and Kristina Straub’s Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology.

11 See, for example, Colin Wells’ The Devil & Doctor Dwight: Satire & Theology in the Early American Republic. For an emblematic primary text, see John Trumbull’s M’Fingal: An Epic Poem.

12 See Cameron McFarlane’s The Sodomite in Fiction and Satire, 1660-1750 for a compelling history of the sodomite’s changing representation and function throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

13 For further scholarship on eighteenth century satire and sexuality, see Tita Chico’s Designing Women: The Dressing Room in Eighteenth-century English Literature and Culture, Vic Gatrell’s City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London, Katherine Mannheimer’s Print, Visuality, and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Satire, and Karen Harvey’s Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century.

14 One of the most notable examples of farce in eighteenth century American literature is Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s novel Modern Chivalry (1792-1815).

15 See also Thomas A. Foster’s Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man for an analysis of eighteenth century newspaper cultures, farce, and sexuality.

16 For an influential study of the enduring effects of parody on American culture, see Daniel T. O’Hara’s Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency After Foucault.

17 Other important studies of eighteenth century sensibility include Nicole Eustace’s Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution, John Mullan’s Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century, and Janet Todd’s Sensibility: An Introduction.

18 For further scholarship on lesbian and gay studies approaches to camp, see Moe Meyer’s edited collection The Politics and Poetics of Camp and Fabio Cleto’s edited collection Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject.
19 For information on Butler’s early theorizations of gender performativity, see her essay “Imitation and Gender Insobedience” in Diana Fuss’s edited collection Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories.

20 Here, LaFleur is participating in the fraught historicist and unhistoricist debates discussed in the introduction.

21 As John Mullan notes, the language of sentiment in Richardson’s Pamela is “spoken…[and] displayed. Its instrument is a massively sensitized, feminine body; its vocabulary is that of gestures and palpitations, sighs and tears,” which is used as a device for signifying feminine virtue (63).

22 From Romeo and Juliet, Act II, scene ii.


24 For a list of nineteenth century versions of the novella, see Duncan Faherty and Ed White’s preface to Constantius and Pulchera on the website Just Teach One.

25 There is a modest amount of scholarship on The History, transatlanticism, and maritime travel. For example, Ellen Gardiner reads the novella as a “sea romance,” arguing that the “sea functions…as an obstacle to the lovers’ union” (196). Thomas Philbrick observes that Constantius and Pulchera is one of the earliest “American example[s] of the extensive use of nautical elements in prose fiction…But in spite of all this prolonged and violent nautical action, the author gives almost no sense of the ship, the sailor, or the sea” (29-30). Finally, in The Geographic Revolution in Early America, Martin Brückner argues that Constantius and Pulchera “takes place in the textual setting of the spelling book,” and the novella is “shaped by the reading practices taught in geography textbooks” (180).
CHAPTER 4
QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE AND ARTHUR’S CRIMINAL CONFESSION

On August 17th, 1786, Johnson Green was executed “for the Atrocious Crime of BURGLARY” in Worchester, Massachusetts (134). Green’s Life and Confession; Together with his LAST and DYING WORDS was “Printed and Sold at the Printing-Office at Worchester” by Isaiah Thomas on the day of his execution. A one-page broadside accompanied by an engraving of a hanging, the Life and Confession reveals a profound engagement with the problem of property crime in the early republic. Tellingly in Green’s autobiographical account, his broadside, consistent with other forms of gallows literature from the period, stresses not only his grievous capital crime, but also the petty offences which preceded his unforgivable act—in other words, his narrative follows the traditional rhetoric of slippery slope, where small crimes are read as precursors and indicators of capital crime (DeLombard 96). The criminal autobiographical genre grew and adapted, largely as a literary response to, and featuring, those accused of property crime. As Daniel A. Cohen notably explains, “the last speeches and longer criminal autobiographies that flourished between 1730 and 1800 had evolved…out of the conversion narratives and pious confessions appended to execution sermons” (117).¹ In an era when property crime was sweeping through New England, the demands for social control and legislative action were pressing, leading to the passage of strict laws to combat theft, burglary, robbery, and illegal sales (Cohen 118).²

While the authorship of Green’s account is unknown, his confession is written in the first person, and it is intended to be read as Green’s authentic autobiography, providing a poignant glimpse into his exceptional life.³ Born in Bridgewater,
Massachusetts, Green was the son of “a negro” and an “Irish woman named Sarah Johnson” (134). At age five, he was “bound…as an apprentice…to be instructed in Agriculture” (134). At age eighteen, Green “enlisted into the American service,” but failed to contribute to the liberation cause due to his “addict[jion] to drunkenness, the keeping of bad company, and…correspondence…with lewd women” (134). From there, he descended into a life of relentless crime:

Sometime after I was engaged in the American service, at a certain tavern in Sherburne I stole fifteen shillings, one case bottle of rum, one dozen of biscuit, and a pillow case with some sugar. In April, 1781, I stole at the Highlands, near West-Point, a pair of silver shoe buckles, was detected, and received one hundred lashes. (135)

Throughout Green’s *Life and Confession*, the slew of thefts increases exponentially and reoccurs in cyclical monotony. From hopping through open windows or out of washtubs—spanning across businesses and residencies from southern Massachusetts to Rhode Island—Green made off with numerous articles of clothing, food, and money.

His ability to obfuscate the law was made further evident in his ability to escape from jail, delay his imminent death sentence, and even steal from government officials. During his first extravagant escape from jail, for instance, Green—almost comically—decided to steal “a cheese out of a press” “the very same evening” (137). In Rhode Island, he broke into the cellar of Justice Belknap’s “and stole about thirty pounds of salt pork, one neat’s tongue, one pair of nippers, one box of awls, and one bag” (138). However, he was soon caught, and “it remarkably happened on the 13th ultimo (the day that had been appointed for…[his] execution] that…[he] was committed to gaol in Providence” (138). He confessed to the Court his crimes and “many more…the particulars of which might tire the patience of the reader” (138). Although it’s difficult to
discern what crimes Green committed for sustenance versus profit, his narrative conveys a vivid depiction of the life of a harrowing thief in the early republic.

At the same time, Green’s confession and life history provide insight into constructions of race and sexuality in the early republic, framed around legal discourse and rhetoric. Following the list-like and empirical accounts of crime in Green’s *Life and Confession*, he signals his sexuality as implicated in his crimes of property disruption. Green admits,

> Some of the things I have stolen I have used myself—some of them I have sold—some have been taken from me—some I have hid where I could not find them again—and others I have given to lewd women, who induced me to steal for their maintenance. I have lived a hard life, by being obliged to keep in the woods; have suffered much by hunger, nakedness, cold, and the fears of being detected and brought to justice—have often been accused of stealing when I was not guilty, and others have been accused of crimes when I was the offender. (138)

Here, Green’s precarious criminal self is located at a peculiar and indeterminate space between race, sexuality, and the Law. While Green is marginalized and disenfranchised due to his social and ethnic status as mulatto, his sexual proclivities for congregating with “lewd women” and “steal[ing] for their maintenance” are transgressive acts of the body and its desires. Yet, Green’s transgressions also require the criminal agency to disrupt and seize property and capital for the purposes of unbound satisfaction, ironically reconfiguring modes of agency and the authority to claim property rights and ownership—as he himself is a form of property. Green’s pointed skepticism and critique toward “justice” and its systems of discipline, correction, and control can be interpreted as the racialized criminal’s refusal to play the part of the subordinated, abject aggressor in his own life history. He takes pleasure in his property crimes and refuses to internalize the shame and stigma of non-normative (ie., extramarital) sexual behavior.
In fact, Green continues to confess to countless other illicit and promiscuous sexual activities in his narrative, which not only help explain his descent into capital theft, but also the ways race and sexuality are positioned and function in his narrative. Green assumes a penitent stance when confessing:

I have had great dealings with women, which to their and my shame be it spoken, I often too easily obtained my will of them…I have had a correspondence with many women, exclusive of wife, among whom were several abandoned Whites, and a large number of Blacks; four of the whites were married women, three of the blacks have laid children to me besides my wife, who has been much distressed by my behaviour. (138)

Following Thomas A. Foster’s scholarship on the historiography of sexuality in eighteenth century New England, Green’s public acknowledgment and investment in documenting the details of his non-normative sexuality, which was most probably prodded and appended by publishers to incite sensation and fear, was meant to signify “broader concerns about racial purity and the perceived threat [non-white] men posed to white households” (Sex 148). While Green’s non-white self is latently characterized by hyper-sexuality, bodily excess, and pleasurable overindulgence, he at once reifies the perceived social threat miscegenation posed to the American body politic, while he simultaneously (and counter-discursively) uses his unbound sexuality to disrupt capital and social relations, which I will lay out in the chapter. In Sex among the Rabble, Clare Lyons expands upon Foster’s assertions. She contrasts the “vibrant pleasure culture” in pre-Revolutionary War America (1), notably in Philadelphia,” to a “new gendered system” that emerged in post-Revolutionary War America, which foreclosed sexual possibility and enabled a rigid discourse on deviancy, race, and class. This Euro-American emergent discourse took as its subject the non-white male, whose sexuality, according to Lyons, was imagined as “the manifestation of…[a] depraved character”
In this light, we can interpret Green’s admission to (private) sexual transgression from a Foucauldian perspective, in which power hails upon the subject and uses confession as a technique for “producing truth” (*History of Sexuality* 59). Yet, we can also interpret Green’s confession to dissolute and lustful sexuality as the ultimate justification for his crime of capital and property disruption. His racialized and sexualized body hangs not only between life and death, but between civil society and personhood, waiting for “justice” to be executed effectively.

Following Jeannine DeLombard’s scholarship on race and early American crime literature, Green’s narrative becomes emblematic of the ways gallows literature positions the racialized print subject as a legal subject. For DeLombard, the slave, or in the case of the freeman, the civil slave, ascends from civil death into legal (seemingly paradoxical) personhood through the form of the criminal confession (92). To elucidate further, the genre of criminal confession is central to black personhood, for through the genre, ironically, black subjects assume a legal personhood. If personhood gives name to identity, insomuch as identity shifts through mediated interaction, then the act of naming the self is not merely individual. Rather, personhood is cultural, and achieved through specific political conditions and social strategies—personhood thus gives rise to the idea of a person as conceptualized by the ideology of a society, which in turn gives rise to the markers of identity which are highly contextual. Meaning, the black subject uses crime as a conduit for ascending from the debased status as slave into a culpable, legal personhood, thereby creating a new identity articulated and imagined through the discourses of law and civil society. Yet, if Green is disavowed personhood in everyday life due to social and political limitations and violent racial divide, then he is ironically
brought to life through death in print, recasting his criminal behaviors, which take race, property, and sexuality as points of intelligibility, to create a coherent self who breaches systems of power.

In the aforementioned examples of theft, illicit sex, and miscegenation in Green’s *Life and Confession*, we see glimpses of an individual black self and civic personality who achieves agency through his quests for commodity pleasures, participating in (albeit forbidden and illegitimate) socio-economic relations. Green’s narrative extends beyond a robotic recapitulation of stolen goods, where the act of telling one’s life story requires agency, responsibility, and a claim to authorship (DeLombard 92). While there is much speculation over the authenticity of Green’s narrative (and many others like his), his claim to an authentic self, beginning his narrative by announcing that he is a “dying man…leav[ing] to the world the following History,” is also a claim to a subjectivity, even if that subjectivity links illicit sexuality with racialized criminality to achieve its articulation (134). Interestingly, the rise of the eighteenth century black criminal confession coincided with the development of the individual in the early republic. As Christopher L. Tomlins notes, “The autonomous individual subject and the restrained democracy it exercised were creations of the early republic’s legal discourses. These discourses had established a society of safeguarded property, separated public and private spheres of action, and disciplined actors” (389). When we return back to Green’s confession, following DeLombard’s theorization, we can see begin to imagine how his non-white subjectivity is articulated through criminal agency and mediated through print culture and textual circulation.
I begin with Green’s text in order to foreshadow to the paradoxes of black subjectivity and agency in the criminal confession genre. In this chapter, I further explore how black personhood is brought to life against the caustic and painful backdrop of death at the gallows. I will show how the medium of confession creates black agency and power through both property disruption and sexual power, displacing the rigid access points to capital that arrange the social body and its hierarchal framework. Put bluntly, in the eyes of the law, blacks were property—that is, until they committed a crime, like theft or rape. They then became subjects of the law. The criminal confession genre showcases this emergent and complex form of subjectivity.

In black crime literature, conceptions of race, sexuality, and the Law coalesce to produce a fluid subject who both destroys and creates, indeterminately hanging between life and death in print. As such, this chapter stages an intervention in early African-American literary studies, and uses queer theory as an apparatus for interrogating the complexities of blackness and black subject making in a national culture of violent racism and turbulent power dynamics. I argue for the possibility of a queer of color subject who destabilizes rigid conceptions of gender, race, and sexuality, and who breaches the borders of property and personhood, Law and civil justice, through an indeterminate and spectral life-through-death in print. Using *The Life, and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man; Who Was Executed at Worcester, October 10, 1768* as the case study for this chapter, I find this narrative especially useful for demonstrating my argument because in addition to Arthur’s long string of property crime, he also addresses accusations of rape. While the act of rape involves violence, violation, and disruption, rape also (ironically) affords a place where the black accused
shift from legal objects to legal subjects in the eyes of the law, disrupting the metaphorical homogeneity of the republican body politic that posits non-whiteness outside of its ideological intelligibility and scope. This chapter helps to expand and clarify different forms of black sexual agency and personhood during a seemingly incompatible period in African-American history.

**Early Black Literature and the Question of Archive**

Before attempting to theorize queer of color critique in the eighteenth century, I first want to step back and trace the problems, challenges, and complexities of working with eighteenth century black literature, which will help to explain why the eighteenth century is so widely understudied in African-American literary history and why it’s vital to draw critical attention to gallows literature. Historically, one of the central problems with the development of the black literary canon was that critical frameworks—notably William L. Andrews’s *To Tell a Free Story*, Dickson Bruce’s *The Origins of African American Literature*, and Dorothy Porter’s *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837*—assumed that African-American literary productions began among a very select group of black writers who anticipated the development of the canon in distinctly American terms. Then, Paul Gilroy shifted critical attention to the geography of the Atlantic. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy “address[es] one small area in the grand consequence of…historical conjunction—the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by…blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering…the black Atlantic world” (3). His publication was significant in that it reframed how we did the history of African-American literature. Instead of searching for the nationalist roots of the black experience, Gilroy
draws our attention to the transatlantic—or, the permeability of culture and ideology between Africa, America, and Britain. For Gilroy, this triangular trade and mode of diaspora facilitated a network of oppositional exchange, where conceptions of race and oppression coalesced to produce a “rhizomorphic, fractal structure” of “transcultural, international formation” (4). This formation, then, allowed for the reconceptualization of intellectual history and served as a liberatory alternative to the traditional narratives of bondage and emancipation.

Gilroy’s book-length study had a profound impact on the development and expansion of the African-American literary canon. In “Apprehending Early African American Literary History,” Jeannine Marie DeLombard echoes this assertion, arguing that “Gilroy’s geographical reorientation of the field had the unexpected effect of prompting a corresponding (if less celebrated) chronological recalibration” (93). Here, DeLombard addresses the shifts and consolidations in black studies from the 1960s and 70s to the present. Departing from the commonly accepted tradition’s starting point with the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, and Lucy Terry, the African-American literary canon was profoundly reshaped by Gilroy’s intervention. More specifically, The Black Atlantic enabled the formation of a “transatlantic Afro-diasporic canon” in the academy, rerouting critical attention to the life writings of John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, Briton Hammon, Ottobah Cugoano, Venture Smith, Ignatius Sancho, and James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (DeLombard “Literary History” 93). While it’s important to interrogate the male-dominated nature of the early canon, these texts neatly frame the black subject as forward looking, patiently waiting for emancipation. In
this light, transatlantic theory did not fully afford the writers it brought to the limelight voice and agency.

Garnering traction from Gilroy’s transatlantic intervention, a second problem emerged in the development of the black literary archive—the problem of the forms of literature and experience the archives gives precedence to. This becomes especially notable and evident when we consider the replicated movement of black bodies from south to north, enabling a linear transformation from slave to subject, whereas Gilroy’s Black Atlantic suggests a more diasporic, hybrid black subjectivity. In other words, the archive establishes the slave narrative as authentic, while earlier forms of black documentary culture are cast as suspect and juvenile. As DeLombard notes, the eighteenth century archive is critically situated as a precursor to the development of the slave narrative, which is understood to represent an authentic black subject who bears witness to the atrocities of slavery—thereby leading to “the [African-American] canon proper” (“Literary History” 94). Echoing DeLombard’s assertions, Michael Drexler and Ed White provide a useful illustration for problematizing the narrative of the black literary canon. In their edited collection Beyond Douglass: New Perspectives on Early African-American Literature, Drexler and White elucidate:

[The] use of the early African-American canon becomes clearer when we examine the semiotic system anchored by…Olaudah Equiano…and Frederick Douglass…Equiano and Douglass each signal the articulation of an ostensibly typical and predictive African-American subjectivity, with the transition from the former to the latter essentially tracing a series of changes characteristic of the more traditional canon. Thus the common shorthand narrative traces…Equiano’s religiously charged language and more limited social engagement (e.g., the narrower definition of abolition), to Douglass’s more secular and patriotic subjectivity, for which politics…is itself the sign of a broader program of consciousness-raising and national (or racial) pride. (2)
Here, Drexler and White shed light on and problematize the narrative of a black literary genealogy—a genealogy which supposes Douglass as the archetype for the development of the slave narrative and early African-American literature. Within this framework, then, figures like Phillis Wheatley and (later) Harriet Jacobs provide the patriarchal counterpoint and “woman response” to slavery and submission. Still, Drexler and White contend that this implicit “critical division of labor” in genealogical framing situates Equiano and Douglass as upholding “the integrity and autonomy of the tradition while Wheatley and Jacobs [embody] the practical-critical problems of interpretive resistance” (3). Within this framing, the black self is an emergent construction, shaped by the currents of movement and realized through the politics of removal and relocation. The Black Atlantic, in its dialogues on the “geographical, ontological, and rhetorical,” to use Phillip Gould’s terminology, shaped language and discourse to conceptually yield the black self whose nascent articulation is more complex than a divide between race and nation (“Early Print Literature” 39). This self, according to critical framings, is made authentic through the form and function of the slave narrative, bearing witness to bondage, oppression, and its representation. We look forward to the nineteenth century to make evident the vision of the Douglass and post-Douglass self—a self committed to antislavery politics and one who fulfills ideals of “self-empowerment, resistance, and spiritual reform” (Graham and Ward 9). Indeed, Drexler and White demonstrate discontent with the ways early African-American literature is critically framed in literary history, and they call for a wider archive of print culture that takes into account the variations and experiences of eighteenth century black life.
From this growing scholarly discontent, then, Jeannine DeLombard makes her intervention for recuperating the black criminal narratives of the eighteenth century. According to DeLombard, “critics have proven increasingly reluctant to avow the canon’s penal origins” because of speculation over authenticity and the threat of fabrication (“Literary History” 94). Indeed, scholars disavow black criminal literature as a reflection of colonialist ideology, inauthentic to the ways Africans negotiated literacy and communication through interethnic exchange in the spatial proximity of the plantation and other geographical sites of racial crossing. Yet, Phillip Gould notes that early republican print culture necessitated a specific public personae, regardless of whether blacks wrote or did not write their own texts:

Early black writing emerged as an identifiable genre during the second half of the eighteenth century and in the era of the Enlightenment…Whether black subjects composed their own works, or related them orally to white editors, they were highly self-conscious of the potentially powerful yet vulnerable position that publication imposed upon them. Print culture, in other words, necessitated the construction of public personae for black subjects who were traditionally disenfranchised, culturally suspect, and often racially maligned. (39-40)

Here, Gould helps to clarify how black subject-making coincided with the proliferation of print culture and the rise of the public sphere. The process for the black subject to “enter” the public sphere required a highly delicate balance between the print subject and (what I term) the white arbitrator, or the publisher, editor, to name a few, creating a collaborative depiction of the black self, which crossed precarious lines between authenticity and representation. A tenuous dynamic at best, early black literary productions demonstrated, according to Gould, a complex configuration of language and knowledge, producing an amalgamation of Enlightenment thought on racial being (40). At the same time, early black literature varied widely in genre, form, and audience,
enabling a multiplicity of discourses to flourish, most notably ideas on sentimentalism, Christianity and affect, natural rights, and philosophies of race (Gould 40). While Gould’s expansion of early black literature is timely, it is also contingent upon the archive of transnational slave narratives, which provide us with comprehensive insight into emergent discourses on liberty and abolitionism.

For DeLombard, black criminal narratives offer a different genre from which to conceptualize the creation of a black subject in print culture. While, according to DeLombard, black gallows literature offers critical insight into African-American literary history and the concept of the author, these same narratives fail to provide insight into the concept of a distinct black literary tradition. Indeed, “gallows literature inserts the theoretical death of the author into literary history” (Shadow of Gallows 37). Since tracing an authentic black self in gallows literature is a futile endeavor due to archival limitations, coupled with the complexities of assessing the literary value and political prowess of such a genre, DeLombard urges historians and literary scholars to excuse themselves “from attempting to reconstruct strategic negotiations over the production of gallows texts or gauge their resistance to enslavement and incarceration” (37). Instead, DeLombard asks scholars to reorient their approach to the literary-historiographic value of black gallows literature and the requirement of authenticity, considering instead the ways “even fictive first-person participation in print culture filled out the partial, culpable personhood recognized and publicized by criminal proceedings”— a personhood that accrues legal blame, responsibility, and consequences (37). By engaging in this reoriented approach, according to DeLombard’s framework, scholars can unearth the ways law and nation amalgamate in print to ironically bring to life the civic personhood
of the black subject. She establishes the “performance of black authorship [in criminal literature] far more important than the historical authenticity of that authorship” (37). In creating this alternative methodology, DeLombard highlights the ways the study of gallows literature can radically transform our stable notions of eighteenth century black subjectivity as “objects of property…[and] agents of disorder” into a complex and multifaceted personhood. The indeterminate space between the black self as slave to convict to actor and agent of authority fuels the need for studying and recuperating gallows literature as a highly unauthorized genre of early African-American literature.

**Arthur’s Case**

My theorization of blackness, sexuality, and power in eighteenth century confessional/gallows literature uses as its key case study *The Life, and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man* (1768), a popular broadside published in Boston following the title criminal’s execution for the rape of a white woman named Deborah Metcalfe in 1768—an integral time before the eve of the Revolution. In her recent book *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America*, Karen Weyler notes: “Late eighteenth-century America had a strong appetite for crime literature…[E]xecution sermon[s], newspaper accounts, trial transcripts, criminal conversion narratives, execution accounts, and crime ballads, inspired by popular English genres, also fed the general public’s interest in, and anxiety over, criminal behavior.” In fact, throughout the eighteenth century, ministers actively solicited narratives from black and non-white subjects to fuel these anxieties and to incite sensation in popular (public) literary form. The broadside’s visual and spatial layout pictured below demonstrates the ways black
male bodies were seen as volatile and sensational figures for consumption in the eighteenth century cultural/criminal imagination.

Figure 4-1. *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur, October 20, 1768. For a rape committed on the body of one Deborah Metcalfe.* Boston: Printed and sold in Milk-Street 1768. Library of Congress. Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 36, Folder 26.

For readers unfamiliar with Arthur’s narrative, *The Life, and Dying Speech* catalogs Arthur’s extensive crime spree, from petty theft to jail breaks, that lead up to his capital crime, rape. However, as Nicole H. Rafter importantly notes:

Mrs. Metcalfe, reluctant to see Arthur hanged, settle[d] for financial compensation, freeing Arthur to commit a host of other offences for which the authorities eventually sentenced him to death. However, in keeping with the late eighteenth century trend to sensationalize crime and, to elaborate the figure of the black rapist, the broadside’s title misrepresents Arthur’s conviction offence as rape alone. (5)

Here, Rafter relegates Arthur’s narrative to the realm of sensation and tabloid. Indeed, from a manifest perspective, Arthur’s *Life* is unremarkably formulaic. The narrative
offers a sensational and meticulously oriented depiction of the black male criminal, focusing on the causes of his crime and eventual downfall. *The Life* expectedly draws upon the conversion narrative trope in which the rebellious slave violates the trust, compassion, and kindness of the benevolent master. For example, to introduce his narrative, Arthur states, “I was born at Taunton, January 15, 1747, in the house of Richard Godfrey, Esq., my Mother being his Slave, where I lived fourteen Years; was learned to read and write, and was treated very kindly by my Master.” From there, Arthur’s narrative conforms to the formula of confession, concluding with repentance. His life history and penance appear shaped by the officiating minister, who locates sex, drinking, and rebellion against the benevolent master as the causes of Arthur’s crime(s)—and which indirectly link Arthur’s literacy to his capacity for rebellion against a benevolent master (Rafter 5). To conclude his narrative, Arthur movingly grants:

> I cannot conclude this is my Narrative, without gratefully acknowledging the unwearied Pains that was taken by the Rev. Mr. McCarty, to awaken me to a proper Sense of my miserable and wretched Condition, whose frequent Exhortations, and most fervent Prayers, together with those of the rest of God’s people, and my own sincere Endeavours after true Repentance, will I hope prove the Means of my eternal Well-being.

Here, Arthur’s illicit sex, drinking, and lack of submission to authority are reinforced, codifying the timeliness of his execution. The justice of the law seems to have been executed effectively.

Furthermore, critical scholarship on Arthur’s *Life, and Dying Speech* tends to either frame the narrative around limiting paradigms of illicit sex and recalcitrant and unmanageable morals—sustaining dominant historicist readings of eighteenth century black sexualities, where we began shifting from race as cultural difference to race as biologically embedded—or scholarship that circumvents the topic of sex and sexuality
for legal or socio-political analyses of race. For example, in his recently edited critical reader *Documenting Intimate Matters: Primary Sources for a History of Sexuality in America*, Thomas Foster frames the narrative as ideological anxiety over miscegenation: “In Arthur’s description of his life we see the Anglo-American concerns over cross cultural, nonmarital sexual behavior linked to other criminal behavior to produce a corrupt moral character” (33). Conversely, Robert E. Desrochers, Jr. reads the narrative as a socio-political critique of slavery and submission, where the slave resists his status through criminal agency:

*Arthur’s Dying Speech* served to justify his execution but also provided a richly empirical description…of one man’s utter refusal to act the part of a slave. If such well-publicized defiance clearly raised serious questions about the community’s ability to control its most indomitable slaves, it also hinted at a deeper problem: what lesson might other slaves draw from a picaresque tale of a man who had an uncommon ability to avoid capture, making him something of a local legend throughout western Massachusetts? (185)

William L. Andrews echoes Desrochers’ reading, arguing that Arthur’s life is “presented as a symbol of his willful contempt for all systems of ordering and restraining the self” (41). In all three examples, Arthur as a black male rapist is articulated, both implicitly and explicitly, as a scapegoat for reinforcing (white) anxieties over colonial borders, be it social, civil, legal, sexual or otherwise. For Foster, Desrochers, and Andrews, among others, Arthur functions as a chaotic disruption to the social order and the ideals of the American body politic, cast as an outsider figure.⁹

Yet, all three scholars fail to take into account the ways Arthur’s personhood and agency is constructed through the medium of print circulation and discourse, enabling the possibility for a defined black subject to emerge who breaches the boundaries of the body politic’s rigid homogeneity. According to DeLombard, Arthur’s broadside stands “at
the furthest remove from any plausible black consciousness, [and] offers a worthy test case for the death of the condemned black author” (Shadow of Gallows 92). She argues that the value of Arthur’s narrative lies neither in the construction of a transgressive black self nor in the (presumed) textual collaboration between the minister and the convict. Rather, DeLombard demonstrates the complex ways Arthur’s black subjectivity is brought to life in print circulation, constructing a personhood—and rejecting chattelhood—by disrupting property relations (92). Thus, while Arthur’s Life, and Dying Speech is delivered on the occasion of his death sentence for committing a crime of the body (rape), he ultimately articulates a (seemingly repentant) criminal self who steals and tricks for the purposes of seeking out a selfhood—which I take to mean in legal terms, attaining individual integrity (i.e., ownership of conduct) for legitimate accountability—amidst societal restrictions and outright refusals.

**Queer of Color Critique, Capitalism, and the Black Penal Subject**

The outwardly never-ending forms of property disruption in Arthur’s narrative, articulated through theft, strikingly enable (what I theorize as) a queer of color subject to emerge against the caustic backdrop of America’s emergent capitalism. For example, in uttering his criminal “character,” Arthur remarks:

I went first to Sandwich, where I lived two Months in a very dissolute Manner, frequently being guilty of Drunkenness and Fornication; for which crimes I have been since famous, and by which I am now brought to this untimely Death. At Sandwich, I stole a Shirt, was detected, and settled the Affair, by paying twenty Shillings. My Character being now known, I thought proper to leave the Place.

Here, the troublesome potentials of Arthur’s consumption patterns are particularly alarming to the American body politic’s social practices (4). Arthur metaphorically problematizes the socio-politics of blackness in America by engaging in “dissolute”
consumption practices, notably “Drunkenness and Fornication,” for the purposes of unbound pleasures that are simultaneously racial, gendered, and sexual insomuch as they represent the desires of the subordinated slave body—a body whose pleasures and aspirations are disavowed. Arthur’s thefts and ability to negotiate finances and transactions in the marketplace illuminate his status as a multifaceted and intersectional subject, a subject who assumes agency through the proto-capitalist system that attempts to disavow his power into unraveled exploitation. By juxtaposing his consumptive pleasures alongside his thefts, Arthur begins his transformation from object to subject, a transformation largely marked in the narrative through his illegal quests and drives for commodities in an emergent capitalist/consumer culture.

Scholarship on early American economic practices helps us to illuminate the ways proto-capitalist systems took shape in the eighteenth century, and, in turn, helps illustrate the way that Arthur works to disrupt this system. Scholars emphasize the major economic transformations in the wake of the Revolution. In the early 1700s, regional patterns of economic sufficiency emerged. For example, the New England colonies focused on ship manufacturing and sailing to generate wealth, while the southern colonies, for example, relied on slave labor to harvest and sell tobacco, rice, among other goods (Perkins 51-59). America’s economic philosophy hinged on the idea of mercantilism, or the idea that “state action” is needed to transform a primarily self-sustaining agricultural economy into a “commercial and industrial” state (Schlesinger 220). The American Revolution profoundly reshaped the economic landscape of the newly formed nation across Republican and Federalist political lines, enabling the ideologies of individual liberty and entrepreneurship to flourish. With the passage of the
U.S. Constitution, a common market emerged, along with a profound “American” interest in diversifying the marketplace to include manufacturing and banking endeavors. However, the new conception of a market economy was not without fission or tension. Manuela Albertone observes,

_Faced with making strategic choices for the new nation, Thomas Jefferson’s Republicans encouraged the societies’ activities as a means of supporting the party’s project of agrarian democracy, which was based on the primacy of agricultural development and opposed to the financial and manufacturing model of Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists who followed the example of Great Britain._ (Albertone 339)

As a result, the early republic’s market paved the way for new forms of commerce and economic developments to emerge, along with new patterns and modes of consumption and capital.11 At the heart of this economic and political transformation was the precipitated beginning of capitalism.

The emergence of capitalism in America revolutionized the marketplace and social relations. In _The Origins of American Capitalism_, James Henretta explores everyday business ventures, such as the practice of hiring external labor on a plantation or establishing a contractual relationship for the purposes of “directing labor, rationalizing production, and expanding markets” (257), in order to demonstrate the ways:

_Each transaction was not merely an event, the exchange of goods in a market ‘place.’ Rather, it was part of an increasingly prevalent process that involved the conscious and active mobilization of labor ‘time.’_ Northern merchants and traders no longer derived profits only from control of market exchange; as capitalist entrepreneurs they organized the productive process itself. (259)

Here, Henretta makes poignant observations about the development of capitalism in America. For Henretta, economic relationships changed after the Revolution, where
traditional farming or artisan communities “were now…deeply embedded in profit-oriented exchange relationships” (260). In many ways, Americans were not just participating in the marketplace. Rather, they were a part of it. From 1775 onward, approximately ten percent of the free labor population worked for wages. Furthermore, slaves also experienced the effects of emergent capitalism, witnessing external labor hires, new production systems, and ownership transference (Henretta 260). Henretta notes that the rapid and systemic development of domestic capitalism coincided with four distinct occurrences. He elucidates,

First, a buoyant transatlantic demand for agricultural products encouraged thousands of ordinary Americans to sell more goods in the market. Second, rapid population growth—from natural increase and immigration—created a surplus of workers, facilitating the emergence of wage labor. Third, many American merchants, landowners, and artisans became aggressive entrepreneurs, reorganizing production to exploit the new market opportunities and labor supply. Finally, as a result of independence, the political state became increasingly responsive to the needs and interests of these ‘monied men.’ (261)

From these occurrences gave rise to widespread consumerism in America, where commodities and necessities were demanded at exponentially higher volumes in the marketplace.

Despite criticism over the ethics of slavery and commodity culture, slave labor became increasingly costly and “unfree” during the period. Bourgeois property possessions and ownership disputes took precedence in the courts and legal rights proceedings. Since slave labor was at the heart of proto-venture capitalism and labor relations, it formed the foundation for initiating an (albeit highly exploitative) mode of production for the purposes of initiating and codifying proto-capitalist relations. Indeed, the labor of Africans “was extracted by means of unprecedented structural violence and
institutionalized forms of natal alienation and social death” (Dillon *New World Drama*). Thus, in order to disrupt the proto-capitalist project that embraces racialized submission at all costs for the purposes of financial gain, I turn toward innovative scholarship at the intersection of queer theory and critical race studies to bring to life the possibility of Arthur as an eighteenth century queer of color subject.

In order to elucidate the concept of a queer of color subject in Arthur’s narrative, I borrow liberally from Roderick Ferguson’s instrumental scholarship on race, sexuality, and economic systems. In *Aberrations in Black*, Ferguson mobilizes queer theorists to explore the complexities of race and ethnicity as integral to the study of sexuality. Ferguson’s nascent articulation of queer of color critique hinges on an interrogation of Marxist thought on capitalism. He argues that Marxism unfairly situates deviancy, crime, and social disorder on non-conforming subjects. The implicit argument underpinning this correlative link is the idea that capital is the conduit through which deviancy is created, disrupting social hierarchies. For Ferguson:

> [Q]ueer of color analysis...interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique. (149)

For Ferguson, women of color feminism as an academic tradition, critical practice, and mode of social critique holds striking relevance and significance to queer of color analysis in that sexuality is established as a constituent element of race and gender. Thus, in order to craft a genealogy of queer of color critique, Ferguson turns to women of color feminism as the narration’s starting point. Most interestingly, Ferguson resists fusing or amalgamating a genealogy of queer of color critique with a lesbian and gay
studies/queer theory tradition, arguing that hegemonic whiteness is its principal subject of analysis, precluding the lives and experiences of minority subjects.

Taking up the racist and patriarchal practices of early twentieth century sociology, Ferguson argues that the African-American novel serves as an important textual space for shedding light on—and bearing witness to—the gender and sexual variations and marginal expressions that encompass black culture in capitalist society. As Ferguson elucidates, “[t]he gender and sexual heterogeneity of…culture interrogate[s] the singularity, normativity, and universality presupposed by national culture. As minority cultural forms, African American novels record that interrogation” (24). While Ferguson’s project was instrumental in illuminating the complexities of race, class, gender, and sexuality in twentieth century literature, society, and politics, a glaring question remains—could earlier forms of black writing and other genres besides the novel lend themselves to queer of color critique? Could, for example, eighteenth century black gallows literature, notably Arthur’s confession, bear witness to the gender and sexual variations of older social and cultural formations, even if capitalism as we know it today was not fully formed?

Arthur’s confession illustrates the ways economics and property relations structured personhood and agency by exposing the function of object-hood and subject- hood in an emergent capitalist/consumer culture where bodies and labor are commodified and exploited. For example, in an act of masquerade and disguise to shatter the boundaries of social difference, Arthur recounts:

[D]ressed in the Habit of a Squaw, and made of my own Cloaths a Pappouse; in this manner we proceeded to Hadley undiscover’d where I was introduced… to an Indian Family, where I tarried only one Night, being discover’d in the Morning by one Mr. Shurtleff, a Person who had
been sent after me; with him I went to Springfield, where I met my Master, who took me down to Middletown with a Drove of Horses, where he sold me to a Dutch Gentleman, whose Name I have since forgot. The very Night after I stole from the Widow Sherley, (a Person whom kept a public House in that Place) five Pounds; and the next Night, by getting drunk and loosing some of the Money, I was detected and put under the Custody of two Men, for Trial the next Day; From whom I escaped, and went to Farmington.

Here, Arthur metaphorically embodies the form and function of an eighteenth century queer of color subject, shifting from object to subject through his covert and harrowing adventures in diverse social spaces and with diverse peoples. Through a series of shifts and associations, Arthur occupies a variety of social positions that require criminal agency to attain and occupy (to pass). Establishing the performance of multiple selves, such as Indian, thief, and prisoner, as integral to his survival (or the performance of non-fixed identity politics), Arthur queers subjectivity in that his blackness and status as slave blur through the act of criminality, recounted in the criminal confession that also paradoxically queers life and death through print. Since queer of color critique “presumes that...ideology occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality and class in forming social practices,” Arthur stands outside of the markers of identity in that his ceaseless thefts and trickery serve as a conduit for social mobility and as a rejection of socio-economic submission (Ferguson 4). He fluidly uses capital—stolen goods—as an apparatus for claiming a black self that circumvents capital’s rigid social arrangements and hierarchies.

While this social mobility may be temporary, illegal, and fleeting, Arthur’s narrative compellingly demonstrates how the black criminal can transform proto-capitalism’s oppressive force into viable personal, political, and social gain. Since queer of color critique has an alternative genealogy, one rooted in women of color feminism
that “investigates how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital,” Arthur metaphorically functions as a disruption to America’s national project, resisting economic exploitation by becoming the agent of capital, not the object itself (Ferguson 4). Analogous to the ways Ferguson problematizes intellectual traditions that posit capital as the conduit through which deviancy emerges (ie, economic disparity and increased crime/violence), Arthur as an earlier queer of color subject rejects the American body politic as inauthentic to the ways blackness and power are negated and silenced. Thus, when Arthur lists his final slew thefts before his ultimate capital crime of rape, we can imagine the pleasure he takes in his illicit consumptive practices, which he’d normally be excluded from (his culpable personhood does not grant him participation in the economy): “At Weston we stole some Butter from off a Horse. At Waltham we broke into a House belonging to one Mr. Fisk, from whom we took a small Sum of Money, some Chocolate and Rum. At Watertown we stole a Brass Kettle from one Mrs. White of that Place.” While Arthur’s social status is ultimately killed off through the dramatics of the execution, he nevertheless establishes his subjectivity and agential power as viable threats to the American body politic and the emergent capitalist machine.

**Black Agency, Rape, and Sexual Power**

In the eighteenth century, black gallows literature gave rise to the emergence of the myth of the black rapist and to the early linking of racial identity to criminal deviancy. While a risky proposition, we could also “queer” this line of argument by considering how rape narratives—those early confession accounts whereby black criminals confess
to or respond to accusations of rape—serve as productive sites for locating constructions of black male agency, power, consciousness, and sexuality in literary form, utilizing violence as an apparatus for protest. As Thomas Foster elucidates, “a racialized association with rape had …emerged” in the eighteenth century. “Courts disproportionately tried and convicted men of low status. The[se] publication[s] therefore culturally defined the ‘other,’” writes Foster (Documenting Intimate Matters 33). When considering Arthur as a queer of color subject who disrupts proto-capitalism and social arrangements, we must also attend to the difficult and serious complexities of his capital crime—rape and sexual violence—to fully explore the complexities of blackness, sexuality, and power. Overviewing the social and cultural connotations of rape in the early republic, Daniel Williams elucidates:

As it was depicted, rape was a symbolic crime. The woman’s body was property, and thus the act of rape was a theft…Sexuality and criminality were linked in the…cultural perception of New England, and rape revealed the rapist’s capacity to commit all that was evil. The inability to control sexual impulse indicated a more dangerous inability to control all vicious impulses of self. As both nonmarital and nonconsensual sex, rape represented a threat to the family unit, the structural foundation of New England’s patriarchy. (196)

Here, Williams draws attention to the multifaceted ways illicit sex and social hierarchies were inextricably linked in the early American imagination on rape—in which the rapist symbolically functions as a threat to both family and society.
For example, in Thomas Powers’ 1796 confession for rape, the cover page artwork pictured above features his crime prominently with a macabre image of skull and crossbones, signifying the imagined threat of black men and their voracious sexual appetites. While the skull and crossbones iconography appears on an array of eighteenth century execution accounts, the visual rhetoric of the Powers narrative dramatizes the relationship between blackness and abjection. Furthermore, this representation (and others like it) is especially important when we consider the symbolics of black sexuality during the period.¹²

The black male, then, stands at a critical division between race, sexuality, and power. Rape narratives provide insight into the ways the black male criminal disrupts
boundaries of difference, indulging in the unbound and dissolute. At the same time, the act of rape—as Kirsten Fischer eloquently demonstrates in her study of sex and criminality in colonial North Carolina—is the capacity “to obliterate another person’s sexual agency,” serving as a “privilege[s] of power” (161). This space of power, destruction, and violation is particularly amenable to my theorization of race and sexuality in black gallows literature. This isn’t to say, however, that violence against women should be left silent or not vigorously problematized or interrogated in theorizations of eighteenth century black sexualities. Further, the issue of accountability and action must also always be addressed. Taking up Sharon Block’s mapping of race and sexual power in early American society, the black male rapist in print culture stands outside of a “singular hegemonic view” on power and disruption, standing in an indeterminate space between “systems of power”—systems that simultaneously render the black subject powerful and powerless, productive and destructive (xvii-xviii). Black male bodies, then, symbolically engage in a complex process of violation, destruction, and rebirth in gallows literature, resisting dominance and submission and recuperating the painful memories and histories of bodily subjugation. Rape narratives stand at the challenging apex between power, subjectivity, and agency.

Furthermore, when we consider the skewed prosecution rates of black men for sexual crimes, the need to reconsider and study gallows literature (and to riskily study rape narratives in particular) becomes all the more pressing. For example, in his study of the racial dynamics of rape cases in colonial and early republic era Connecticut, Lawrence B. Goodheart notes that out of the eleven criminals sentenced to death for
rape, seven were either slaves or illiterate freemen (61). Echoing Goodheart’s observations, Daniel A. Cohen remarks: “[V]ery few men were executed in late-colonial and early national New England for rape or rape-murder, and a disproportionate number of those cases, both in the courts and in popular literature, did involve black defendants” (“Interracial Rape” 485). In an era when the “the protoracist image of the black man as a cruel ravisher or murdered of white women and children” pervaded popular culture—fueling anxieties over miscegenation and racial-crossing in even the most seemingly progressive and intellectual areas in New England—the need to reconsider and recover blackness and power, with the ambitious aim of social critique, propels my intrigue and investment in the Arthur narrative (Cohen 489). 16

Conversely, Arthur’s quests for social, sexual, and political power is capitalized on and exploited by white publishers who seek to sell his printed story in the diverse and circulating marketplace, analogous to the ways Arthur as a slave—as a commodity—is marketed and sold to white slaveholders. Nevertheless, Arthur’s narrative latently provides a poignantly scathing critique of the commodification of disenfranchised bodies and labor in his scandalous descriptions of sexual pursuits coupled with his interactions with the oppressor and fellow oppressed. Arthur states,

[O]n the 27th of October 1764, I came again to live with my Master at Taunton, where I behaved well for six Weeks; at the Expiration of which Time, going to Town with some Negroes, I got intoxicated; on returning home went into an House where were several Women only, to whom I offered Indecencies, but was prevented from executing my black Designs, by the coming in of James Williams, Esq.; upon which I left the House, but was overtaken by him, who with the Assistance of Mr. Job Smith, committed me to Taunton Goal: On the next Day I was tried before the same Mr. Williams, and was whip’d thirty-nine Stripes for abusing him, uttering three profane Oaths, and threatening to fire Mr. Smith’s House. My Master being now determined, by the Advice of his Friends, to send me out of the Country, I was sold to Mr. John Hill, of Brookfield, with whom
I lived only one Week; was then sold to my last Master, Capt. Clarke of Rutland District, where I behaved well for two Months, and was very kindly treated by my Master and Mistress.

These type of experiences coalesce in his narrative to produce a vision of proto-capitalism that allows for an alternative racial, gendered, sexual, and class consciousness to be cast in sight. In this light, capital is not conduit through which deviancy emerges. Rather, Arthur usefully stages an intervention in which capital is paradoxical. Eighteenth century proto-capitalism, similar to its fully codified twentieth century manifestations, seeks to reify heteropatriarchal ideals, such as principles of virtue and sentiment discussed earlier in this dissertation, while it simultaneously disrupts such ideals by exploiting the forced labor of the powerless—slaves. As Ferguson notes, “capital produces gender and sexual heterogeneities as part of its racialized contradiction” (151). Thus, Arthur’s jarringly quick movement from “going to Town with some Negroes” and getting “intoxicated” to “offer[ing] Indecencies” to “several Women” is at once gluttonous, misogynistic, and violent. Yet on the other hand, Arthur’s perpetual cycle of capture—release (or escape)—sell—sold disrupts the flow of capital that arranges social relations and reaches toward a site of queerness that embraces the abject.

Darieck Scott’s recent scholarship on blackness, queerness, and abjection is particularly amenable to my theorization of an eighteenth century queer of color subject. In his book Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination, Scott draws out the utility of queer readings of the abject:

In queer usages of abjection...we begin with the inescapable slippage across necessarily porous but desperately defended boundaries: the
boundary between the ego and what excludes in order to constitute itself (the female excluded—abjected—to make the male, the homosexual to make the heterosexual). The formulation of abject...[is characterized by] boundaries and exclusion, the abject as what is abjected. (17)

If gallows literature fractures the way we think of blackness and black agency and subjectivity during the period (i.e. by turning objects into subjects, per DeLombard), then Arthur's circulating print narrative presents a radical reconfiguration of power and sexuality. This radical reconfiguration is created through Arthur's transformation from the object of economics into a disrupter and thief of property relations, structuring a print personhood who interrogates “the boundary between the ego and what [it] excludes in order to constitute” the self.

For Arthur, the “formulation of [the] abject” is constituted by breaching the rigid boundaries of exclusion, boundaries that seek to uphold ideological and cultural constructs that relegate the black subject into devolved object-hood. Thus, the act of rape presented in Arthur's confession can be interpreted as the title criminal's desire to destruct and violate for the purposes of social renewal, which is admittedly vexing and highly fraught. He resists subordination at all costs, seeking to invert and destabilize his seemingly pre-determined stagnant social role. In recounting the rape of Deborah Metcalfe, Arthur states:

I one Night, after having stole some Rum from my Master, got pretty handsomely drunk, took one of his Horses, and made the best of my way to her usual Place of Abode; but she not being at home, the Devil put it into my Head to pay a Visit to the Widow Deborah Metcalfe, whom I, in a most inhumane manner, ravished: The Particulars of which are so notorious, that it is needless for me here to relate them.

Here, Arthur, to use Darieck Scott’s language, breaches “the boundary between the ego and what excludes in order to constitute itself.” Giving into impulse and desire, Arthur
steals for the purposes of pleasure and self-gratification. While that pleasure is framed around his refusal to surrender himself as a commodity (but rather an active participant in proto-capitalism’s commodity culture), Arthur then violates Metcalfe’s body to fracture and destroy the slave (object) from the self (subject). His ultimate desire is to feel power and disavow powerlessness by seizing his exclusions. For Arthur, rape becomes the ultimate gesture of degradation and defilement of the American body politic and its citizens that speaks in silence.

As a black and othered self who does not conform to the rules of slavery and submission, Arthur asserts his created civic authority through theft and sexual violence. The two forms of turmoil, which are simultaneously social and political, speak to Arthur’s inability to fit within eighteenth century history and its ideals. In his explanation of the regulation of “heteropatriarchal intimate relations” in modern society, Ferguson points to “labor…[and how it] functions as the antithesis and regulator of sexuality” (84). In comparison to *The Life, and Dying Speech*, Arthur defies slavery’s system of labor exploitation, refusing to play his part in history. Arthur rejects social demand, restraint, and passivity, and he instead embraces unyielding pleasure and desire, attaining incompatible and impossible power.

This power takes up race, sexuality, economics, and the Law as its point of articulation and mode of mobilization. In doing so, Arthur’s *Life, and Dying Speech* demonstrates the ways queer of color critique can be used to reconceptualize black subjectivity and agency during a seemingly incompatible and violent time in proto-capitalist history. While Arthur is ultimately rendered silent and powerless through the American body politic’s machinery of discipline and correction—dramatized through
execution—his *Life, and Dying Speech* lives through death, disrupting the national
day. Arthur haunts the pages of his
broadside, and in doing so, becomes the queer of color subject who embraces
indeterminacy and the drive toward social and political reclamation. His narrative is but
one example of the ways queer theory can transform the historiography of African-
American literature and culture in early America.

**Notes**

1 On the origins of criminal confession in Puritan New England sermon culture, and the adaption of the
genre across 18th century, see Daniel A. Cohen's *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, Daniel E.
Williams's *Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives*, and Karen Halttunen’s
*Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*. In her discussion of the seventeenth
century Puritan conversion narrative, for example, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon explains that the genre
reinforced “the alignment of the visible (worldly) church and invisible (divine) one” (103), functioning as an
“epistemological tool to probe the interior state of…church members” (103-04). For a strong historical
overview of early American crime literature, see Sara Crosby’s “Early American Crime Writing” in *The
Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*.

2 As Cohen explains, the era of the Revolutionary War saw a decline in property crime. However, by the
mid-1780s an influx of serious property crime emerged, particularly in the Massachusetts Bay area. For
example, Cohen notes that there were over a dozen criminal prosecutions for burglary in 1784 alone.
From 1780-1783, there were only four total prosecutions brought before the tribunal (119).

3 For scholarship on the authenticity of eighteenth century black confessional literature and literacy
debates, see Louis Masur’s *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American
Culture, 1776-1865*, in addition to foundational works by Daniel Cohen, Sharon Harris, and Daniel
Williams. While writing about nineteenth century texts, Dickson D. Bruce Jr. describes black criminal
literature as a “web[s] of interaction” between the condemned and the (white) publisher, creating a
“credible black voice…[that] assert[s] the authoritative possibilities for that voice” in abolitionist rhetoric
(x). Also see Jodi Schorb’s recently published *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845* to explore the history and function of literacy in an
era of prison reform and expansion.

4 Depending on time and location, the distinction between “Negro” and “Mulatto” varied widely in
eighteenth century America. However, both groups were subject to enslavement and harsh laws that
were based on biological exclusion. For further information, see Michael Wayne’s recent book *Imagining
Black America*.

5 Although outside of the scope of this chapter, other noteworthy black male rape narratives include
*Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain* (1790) and *The Narrative and Confession of Thomas Powers*
(1796).

6 The life writings of these transatlantic eighteenth century black writers are compiled in Vincent Carretta’s
edited anthology, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the
18th Century*. 
7 In her recent article “Reading Prisoners on the Scaffold,” Jodi Schorb describes the eighteenth century conversion narrative as an appropriation from the Puritan execution tradition. The convict engages in an “inward, reflective process of feeling one’s sin,” drawing a “parallel outward process of ‘verbalizing sin.’” “Ministers and publishers,” according to Schorb, “willingly solicited prisoner accounts that dramatized scenes of spiritual struggle” (157).

8 There has been academic dispute over the authenticity of Arthur’s narrative, particularly with the ways the criminal appears to filter and mediate his life history through the officiating minister’s words. In addition, there has been speculation over why Arthur’s life history is so sweeping. For further information on the authenticity debate, see T.H. Breen’s “Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts” in Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America.


10 For scholarship on economics in the Atlantic world and maritime trade, see Stephen J. Hornsby’s British Atlantic, American Frontier and Paul W. Mapp’s “Atlantic History from Imperial, Continental, and Pacific Perspectives.”


12 While this chapter makes an ambitious attempt to explore the possibility of a queer of color subject in eighteenth century America, it focuses on a specific text—a black male rape narrative geographically centered in New England. Absent, due to the scope of this project and the limitations of the archive, is a discussion of Caribbean sexualities and constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in the South. Representative scholarship includes Trevor Burnard’s Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World, Cynthia Kennedy’s “Nocturnal Adventures in Mulatto Alley: Sex in Charleston, South Carolina,” and The Devil’s Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South, edited by Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie.

13 Important to note, in the early republic rape was considered a crime committed by men on women. In Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man, Thomas Foster notes that “there was no provision for same-sex rape; nor was there a provision for the rape of men” (55).

14 Although outside of the scope of this chapter, see the anonymously authored “The Cameleon Lover” and “The Cameleon’s Defence”—published in the South Carolina Gazette in 1732—for a rare, primary glimpse into the representation of black female sexuality. The poems respond to the anxieties of miscegenation in the South. By the eighteenth century, black slaves comprised the majority of South Carolina’s population, and historical evidence suggests that many planters developed intimate relationships with their slaves (Godbeer Sexual Revolution 208-10).

15 As Daniel A. Cohen explains, “Women of color rarely had the opportunity to lodge legal complaints against sexual assailants of any race in early America, and their attackers were even more seldom convicted or punished” (“Interracial Rape” 489).

16 For further representative scholarship on interracial rape in early America, see Sabine Sielke’s Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990 and Diane Miller Somerville’s Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-century South.
CHAPTER 5
QUEER TIME AND INDIGENOUS SPACE IN *EDGAR HUNTLY*

Charles Brockden Brown’s peculiar Gothic novel *Edgar Huntly* (1799) focuses on the title protagonist’s attempt to unravel the enigmatic murder of his close friend Waldegrave. From twists and turns through Norwalk’s dark recesses, much of the narrative centers on Huntly’s pursuit of his primary suspect, Clithero, a sleepwalking Irish immigrant. Typical in Brown’s fiction, he recasts the European Gothic in distinctly American terms. Whereas eighteenth century European Gothic fiction—in conservative or traditional renderings of the genre—is characterized by supernatural elements (ghosts and monsters), haunted and mysterious spaces (decaying houses and crypts), and eerie inhabitants (monks, vulnerable heroines, and banditti), Brown’s American Gothic is characterized by anxieties over the frontier wilderness, the tension between rationality and irrationality, and fraught race relations, among others. In fact, by the end of the novel, Huntly himself even begins to sleepwalk, blurring the distinctions between reality and madness.

While most scholarly conversations about Brown’s novel tend to focus on the implications of its sleepwalking motifs and plots, Brown’s depiction of the Delaware Indians in the second half of the narrative has gained critical prominence in academic scholarship. In framing their 2006 Hackett critical edition to *Edgar Huntly*, for example, Phillip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro explain the significance of the novel to colonial history: “[T]his is the first American novel to dramatize frontier violence between settlers and first peoples. This novel is therefore a critical point in the long history of representations of Euro-Indian conflict in America,” extending the legacy of contact accounts/narratives of exploration and captivity narratives into the eighteenth century.
In recent years, scholars have produced drastically different interpretations of the novel's American Indian characters and Indian killing plots, or what I call the novel's "indigenous presence."

On the one hand, scholars have linked Brown's representation of Indians to the damaging racialization of the other, thereby creating an essentially "Indian-hating" novel. Scholars have focused on the Indian killing theme that takes place during Huntly's mental deterioration in the second half of the novel. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler compellingly claims:

> It is not the Indian as social victim that appeals to Brown's imagination, but the Indian as projection of natural evil and the id; his [Indians] are therefore treated essentially as animals, living extensions of the threat of the wilderness, like the panthers with whom they are associated. (160)

In agreement with Fiedler, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues: "In *Edgar Huntly*, Brown uses the indigenous terrors of the American wilderness to create a distinctly American Gothic...We see the colonist's conception of the Indian as a murderous savage, a cruel and uncouth miscreant, who...evoke[s] terror" (66). In essence, according to John Carlos Rowe, the novel "rationalizes the colonial displacement of and violence toward native peoples" (44). Furthermore, in his book *Muting White Noise*, James Howard Cox persuasively states: "Huntly...illustrates an inexorable European American fate to conquer Native America, the imperative to annihilate the 'savage'" (209). All four versions note the utility of the Indian killing plot as central to Huntly's development and the emergence of an American Gothic. The implication of these readings is that they see the Indian killing plot as necessary and inevitable to Huntly's restoration/development.
On the other hand, more recent scholarship on the novel has begun to explore Brown’s deployment of Indians as a critique of the American body politic and its racist ideology. In his book *Dislocating Race and Nation*, Robert S. Levine makes a direct claim about *Edgar Huntly’s* deployment of the Native subject, explaining that Brown counter-discursively “scrutinizes the terms of white settler colonialism and displays the anger of its victims” (54). Sydney Krause would agree with this line of argumentation, carefully distinguishing between Brown’s views on race and his characters’ in his framing of the 1984 Kent State University Press edition, noting the complexities of Brown’s social and political influence in literary scholarship. Furthermore, Matthew Wynn Sivils argues that Old Deb, the novel’s mystical indigenous figure with dogs who occupies settler (white) land in the absence of a tribe, symbolically represents the “disposed Indian nations and their fight to retain sovereignty over the land that defines their existence” (96). In fact, in his book *Master Plots*, Jared Gardner even claims that Old Deb is ‘the force behind all the novel’s action, from the murder of Waldegrave to the attack on Solesbury,” metaphorically standing in for the fight over “the rights to this frontier ‘nation’” (71). In all of the aforementioned examples, the Indians of *Edgar Huntly* are described in multidimensional terms, standing at the forefront of a postcolonial uprising.

While most scholarship on *Edgar Huntly’s* Indians tends to focus on Brown’s stances toward imperialism, westward expansionism and imminent ideologies of manifest destiny, race, and imperialism, another strain of scholarship has compellingly studied the novel’s complex relationship between colonialism and sexuality. Dana Luciano, for example, interprets the text as antithetical to the principles of reason and
reproductive futurity, exploring the non-normative desires Huntly shares for Clithero (who, to reiterate, is an Irish immigrant and the chief suspect in the novel’s murder-mystery plot). Luciano draws attention to the ways Huntly, who obsessively stalks Clithero, falls victim to the overindulgences of the body and the problem of carnality. Making note of the striking parallels of the novel to the captivity genre, Luciano persuasively argues:

Although Edgar is at no point in the novel imprisoned by Indians, he is captivated by the carnal body, much as he hopes the reader will be by his narrative. And the referent for that body in this novel is the body of the Indian, a body that Edgar conflates with the notion of violence. (11-12)

For Luciano, the figure of the Indian is symbolic of carnality itself. Analogous to the ways the tangible Indian body calls into question the distinction between man and savage, the metaphorical Indian body calls into question the distinction between natural and unnatural behavior. “Edgar’s sense of disordered nature, his feeling of persecution, and the markedly anal-paranoid terms in which he casts his assessment of Indian ‘appetites,’” writes Luciano, create a “range of bodily excesses that plague and pleasure Edgar throughout the narrative” (15). These excesses produce a form of carnality that both ravishes and enchains the title protagonist, creating a tension between transgression and discipline. In sum, Luciano illustrates the ways the novel queers sexuality and conceptions of normative masculinity.6

For Luciano, Huntly’s sexuality is inextricably linked to the Native American presence in the novel. As Luciano forcefully exclaims, “the projection of perversity that takes place in Edgar Huntly points back to the body of the Indian” (16). In the wild wilderness, Huntly simultaneously becomes an Indian killer and a relentless desirer of a sleepwalking man. This paradoxical linkage between same-sex erotic intensity and
violence underscores the illicitness of homoeroticism in the novel. In fact, Huntly’s entrance into war against the Indian other gives him the social capital to position himself as a patriotic American, or a normative member of the body politic. In her article “Subject Female: Authorizing American Identity,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg echoes these assertions, arguing:

[Huntly’s] wanderings do not end until, killing the last American Indian, he buries his bayonet deep within the Indian’s body...It is only after repeatedly penetrating and then marking his sexual dominance over the Delaware warrior that Huntly can regain access to cultivated American land and America’s civil society. (491)

Thus, the novel sanctifies racialized violence, which I would extend as racialized terrorism given the extremity of Huntly’s massacre, in order to give the passionate pleasures of men momentarily utterance. Racialized violence, then, becomes the conduit through which citizenship and national belonging are legitimated, demarcating the self from the other. At the same time, she argues this violence creates a metaphor of chaos in the novel, establishing a clash or schism between gendered and erotic congruity and national citizenship.

Stephen Shapiro, however, argues that the Indian serve as a conservative force for disarticulating queerness. In his article “’Man to Man I Needed Not to Dread His Encounter’: Edgar Huntly’s End of Erotic Pessimism,” he argues that Old Deb symbolically represents homoerotic desire itself. He elucidates:

The novel presents another nonheteronormative community with the ‘primitive’ ovarian horde of Old Deb, the Delaware Indian queen bee and her army of warrior drones, who are, in turn, descriptively conflated with her pantherlike band of barely domesticated dogs. Because the novel records the first and last sight of the Delawares as a procession entirely performed before Edgar’s bed, the representation of the Indians embodies Huntly’s fantasies about men. (236-37)
While Shapiro obfuscates a theorization of Old Deb’s idiosyncrasies, her relationship with her non-human companions (dogs), and her outsider status from even her Indian tribe, he nevertheless illustrates how the Indian metaphorically functions in relation to homoerotic desire. In essence, he links the novel’s use of indigenous peoples to muted proto-gay expression.

While scholarly consensus seems to position colonial subtexts and the appearance of Indians to obfuscate homoerotic tension as the route for reading the novel queerly, these interpretations do not effectively displace colonialist fantasies of the other and nor do they give indigenous characters enough of a role in queering the novel. To elucidate further, Luciano, Smith-Rosenberg, and Shapiro project latent same-sex desire onto Indian bodies, and in doing so, frame Indians as objects of white queer subjectivity (however muted or restrained it may be). In this chapter, I seek to engage in a queer rereading of *Edgar Huntly*, reexamining the function of the anonymous indigenous others and Old Deb in particular. Although this chapter seeks to problematize *Edgar Huntly* and sexuality studies scholarship, I am also productively engaging in a debate with the novel’s critical race and ethnicity scholars, who have relied on reading Deb through a postcolonial lens in which she symbolically functions, as I will discuss, as the repressed/return of repressed and the ghost that unsettles settler colonialism.

While Deb appears but briefly in the novel, she functions to rewire channels of queerness that do not take white subjectivity (and its masculinist and colonialist implications) as the point of origin. Old Deb is introduced in the second half of the narrative, and she is explained to be an elderly Indian woman who occupies colonialist
land (previously indigenous land) and lives without her tribe. She’s oddly talkative and spends her time with her dogs. By the end of the novel, it is revealed she encouraged her Delaware Indian counterparts to attack the frontier. As Janie Hinds notes, Deb’s “significance is marked by her appearance at the important juncture at which Edgar finds himself stripped of friends, humanity, and even his identity” (324). While Hinds links Deb’s impact to the colonial and postcolonial, exploring the tensions and slippages between the (white) self and its indigenous others, I theorize the native figure as metaphorically caught between time and space, queering the boundaries of the public sphere and its stresses, anxieties, and paradoxes. For, as Michael Warner argues in The Letters of the Republic, the public sphere is exclusionary. He explicates: “You can be a member of the nation, attributing its agency to yourself in imaginary identification, without being a freeholder or exercising any agency in the public sphere” (173). By taking up the recent temporal turn in queer theory, I stage an intervention for disturbing colonialism’s will to disavow indignity as a space, subjectivity, and mode of being. Scholarship on queer temporality directly mobilizes the necessity for (re)reading Old Deb outside of—or rather, out of alignment with—(white colonial) space and time, powerfully aiding in the reimagined historiography of queerness in early America that does limit itself to filtered utterances through whiteness and encoded power relations. By displacing queerness from its correlation to (or conflation with) white subjectivity/sexuality, I seek to recapitulate and expand the power and premise of this dissertation project—to reconceptualize queerness from a predictable state of non-normative sexuality to a fluid form of being and becoming.
Queer Times, Queer Spaces

In order to build toward queering indigenous time and space in Brown’s novel, I first offer important scholarly ideas about the postcolonial in early America. Important to note, postcolonial is used here, following Malini Schueller and Edward Watts’s definition in *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*, as not only the “struggle between imperial and local claims to…authority” (2), but also the “messiness” of indigenous peoples resisting the “Anglophone colonial power” while simultaneously seeking legitimation (2-3). In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin examine the emergence of American postcolonial literature, which they link to the rise of the early U.S. novel in the late eighteenth century. Early American novel writers, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, grappled with “inevitable questions about the relationship between literature and place, between literature and nationality, and particularly about the suitability of inherited literary forms” (15). They further elucidate, “Writers like Charles Brockden Brown, who attempted to indigenize British forms like the gothic and sentimental novel, soon realized that with the change in location and culture, it was not possible to import form and concept without radical alteration” (15). Thus, the eighteenth century American novel not only stages the metaphorical break of the (American) “child” from the (British) “parent.” The novel also demonstrates a capacity for reconfiguring its relationship to the colonizing power, establishing autonomy. Central, then, to the study of *Edgar Huntly*—if we take literature to be a reflection of ideology—is an incitement to theorize colonialism and indigeneity.

The type of colonialism presented in Brown’s novel is referred to as settler colonialism. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin observe, early America is characterized as a “settler” colony as opposed to an “invaded” colony because of the forms of power and
modes of domination utilized. They further explain that European colonialists “dispossessed and overwhelmed the Indigenous populations. They established a transplanted civilization which eventually secured political independence while retaining a non-Indigenous language” and outlook (24). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said echoes and extends these assertions, arguing that “settler society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence” (xxv), leading to the “wholesale colonization and destruction of Native American life” (63). In their introduction, titled “First Peoples,” to a special issue of *Cultural Studies* on postcolonialism, Tony Bennett and Valda Blundell heed the calls of Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, and Said, forcefully arguing: “The structures of colonialism will remain substantially intact if the institutionalized forms of racism...[and] oppression...which, as the solidified legacies of the colonial era, continue to bear uniquely on indigenous populations, are not also dismantled” (2). On the one hand, then, if the early national period is characterized by colonialism’s will to displace and erase—and in reference to time, expunge native history from the national narrative—then how does the indigenous subject in *Edgar Huntly* create a space of critique or resistance? In his article “The ‘Black Hole of Calcutta’ in Charles Brockden Brown’s America,” Eric A. Goldman urges scholars to view the novel as an expression of “America’s struggle with the prospective imperial identity in an international, global context of European imperialism,” firmly rooting the text’s significance to discourses on the postcolonial condition (558). Yet on the other hand, this chapter seeks to work through even more uncharted terrain—what can queer theory do for postcolonial studies for thinking through these ideas and issues?
To think through these questions, I turn toward recent scholarly ideas and trends in queer theory. As a point of reference, conceptions of queer space build upon the foundational notion of queer, which “is dependent on identifying not only idiosyncratic markings that delineate it, but also the oppositions that help to define or form it” (Bryant 79). In addition, “queer sites are ambiguous” in that they can “provide solidarity” while also serve “as risky sites” for policing and spectacle (Bryant 79). As J. Jack Halberstam remarks *In a Queer Time and Place*, queer spaces are constructed as imagined opposition and critique, resisting heteronormativity and its demands for reproduction and the nuclear family. Further, queer spaces are codified through “logics of location, movement, and identification” (1). For Halberstam, queerness detaches itself from an exclusive association with sexuality, and instead serves as an “outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1). Important to note, Queer studies scholarship about space, then, has the potential to “open up new life narratives and alternative relations,” displacing heteronormativity and its social, cultural, ideological, and physical constructions and manifestations (Halberstam 2). Central to the study of queer space is its relation to queer time. As Halberstam elucidates, queer time “is a term for those specific models of temporality” that depart from “the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Important to note, while Halberstam's definition of queer time is bound firmly to the 20th century and modernist ideas of time/history, I reread her scholarship transhistorically. Queer space, then, fits within transhistorical “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity,” describing those “place-making practices…in which queer people engage” (Halberstam
Furthermore, these queer spaces, according to Halberstam, enable “the production of queer counterpublics” (6). Counterpublics, following José Esteban Muñoz’s work on theater and performance and the queer of color subject, are “communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere” (92). Thus, the production of queer space has the potential to disrupt social formations that relegate the marginalized subject outside of dominant culture and its political landscape.

In fact, this line of critical thought has the potential to reframe queer historiography to include those (seemingly) lost and erased outside of national narratives. In 2006, Carolyn Dinshaw, Elizabeth Freeman, J. Jack Halberstam, Lee Edelman, Roderick Ferguson, and Carla Freccero, among others, engaged in a highly productive roundtable discussion about theorizing queer temporalities. Edelman provocatively noted two underlying assumptions about the critical study of space and time: “time is historical by ‘nature’ and history demands to be understood in historicizing terms” (181). He followed up his commentary by providing two poignant questions for rethinking queer time: “But what if time’s collapse into history is symptomatic, not historical? What if framing this conversation in terms of a ‘turn toward time’ preemptively reinforces the consensus that bathes the petrified river of history in the illusion of constant fluency” (181). For Edelman, the stability of time and history are fractured by queer critique, necessitating the deconstruction of social realities and the disarticulation of temporal reproduction as latently heteronormative. Referencing the composition of *In a Queer Time and Place* and contemplating Edelman’s questions, J. Halberstam emphasizes how queer theorizations of space and time shift “our attentions away from discrete bodies performing their desires,” and instead provide “an alternative framework
for the theorization of disqualified and antcanonical knowledges of queer practice” (182). Since the power and premise of this chapter and dissertation as a whole seeks to rethink queerness to the intangible realms of subjectivity, queer temporality aids in facilitating a transhistorical vision of unfixed history and its discontents.

In order to comprehensively theorize queer time and space in *Edgar Huntly*, however, indigenous subjectivity and the legacies of colonialism must be accounted for, which the 2006 roundtable glosses over. In *The Postcolonial Body in Queer Space and Time*, Rebecca Fine Romanow theorizes queer temporality as an influx between the past, present, and future. She further elucidates that “the movements of non-normative time, space, and history are…explicitly imprinted upon…[othered] bodies, [aligning] themselves with the movement from place and time” in (post)colonial and diasporic formations. Further, Romanow explains that the movement of (post)colonial and diasporic bodies necessitates both “temporal and spatial dislocation,” reframing racial violence, dispossession, and cultural erasure which characterize the (post)colonial project (10). Mikko Tuhkanen echoes Romanow’s assertions, arguing:

> As postcolonial theory has pointed out…the full consequences of the world’s reorganizations through truly radical departures and arrivals may be such that they require a continuous, belated accounting, a labor impelled by a persistent sense of disjoinedness and dislocation, of an incompletely executed movement. (260)

Thus, when theorizing Old Deb as a queer indigenous other caught in between space and time—or to use Tuhkanen’s language, at the intersection of “disjointedness and dislocation”—I call to unite queer theory and postcolonial theory to disrupt the American body politic’s exclusionary exceptionalism, generating critiques of settler colonialism and its norms.
Queerness, Colonialism, and Indigeneity

Although Old Deb appears but briefly in the novel—making her entrance in roughly the last third of the text—she establishes her significance by providing Huntly with the clues, and eventual answers, to solving the murder-mystery. She appears at a critical turning point in the novel, marked by colonial violence and the haunting specter of settler colonialism. Huntly, now sleepwalking, is caught in a maze of delirium as he pursues Clithero, his chief suspect, culminating in the massacre of four Indians. As Huntly recounts, “by a series of events impossible to be computed or foreseen, was the destruction of a band…distinguished by prowess and skill…uninured to hostility…precipitate and timerous!” (175). Treading wearily, Huntly stumbles upon “a hut in the wilderness, known among her neighbors by the name of Old Deb” (178). Most intriguingly, Huntly draws attention to the proximity of Deb’s hut to his uncle’s farmstead, which sits on the land previously occupied by Indians: “The village inhabited by this clan was built upon ground which now constitutes my uncle’s barn yard and orchard” (179). In bridging his present meeting with Old Deb to a recollection of a native past now gone, Huntly remarks:

This woman originally belonged to the tribe of Delawares or Lenniennapee. All these districts were once comprised within the dominions of that nation. About thirty years ago, in consequence of perpetual encroachments of the English colonists, they abandoned their ancient seats and retired to the banks of the Wabash and Muskingum. (178)

Here, Huntly invokes the legacy of U.S. colonialism and its relentless drive for conquest and domination at a peculiar moment directly after the Indian murders. Looking back thirty years before the current events in the novel, Huntly situates Deb outside of dominant renderings of the “savage” other, which previously provided him with the logic...
and rationale for the killings. While Huntly remarks that white colonization led to indigenous displacement and dispossession—as he himself is a direct participant and descent of colonialism, symbolic of his uncle’s farmstead—Deb peculiarly stands stagnant in time against the backdrop of her ancestral history. Circumventing colonial violence mapped onto Indian bodies in native history’s past and present, she occupies a queer space and time.

Elizabeth Freeman’s recent scholarship on queer temporality helps us in reading Deb as a critical colonialist anachronism, refusing to relinquish indigenous space and markers of tribal identification. In *Time Binds*, Freeman investigates sites where “an established temporal order gets interrupted and new encounters consequently take place,” thus resisting figurations of time as “seamless, unified, and forward-moving” (xxii). “Queer temporalities,” then, according to Freeman, are “points of resistance to [the] temporal order that…propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: this is, of living historically” (xxii). In the case of Brown’s Old Deb, she establishes “resistance” to the “temporal order” by refusing to play the role of the colonized other, which the American body politic demands of her as part of its “seamless, unified, and forward-moving” drive toward imperial and colonial rule. Deb’s inability to be affected by colonialism’s force to displace and disavow, which is decidedly violent in both literal and metaphorical terms, aids us in not only viewing her as spectral and ghost-like, but indeterminately (un)bound to space and time as well. Old Deb, using Freeman’s language, embodies the inverted turn toward “living historically” in that she displaces the temporal specificity of eighteenth native history and its dominant narrative of subjugation.10
Moreover, Old Deb’s ability to navigate or maneuver through complex channels of space and time is strikingly enabled through imaginings of non-normative gender expression. Huntly recounts:

This emigration was concerted in a general council of the tribe, and obtained the concurrence of all but one female. Her birth, talents, and age, gave her much consideration and authority among her countrymen; and all her zeal and eloquence were exerted to induce them to lay aside their scheme. In this, however, she could not succeed. Finding them refractory, she declared her resolution to remain behind and maintain possession of the land which her countrymen should impiously abandon. (179)

Here, Huntly emphasizes Deb’s “female[ness]” as a notable feature of her participation within the “general council of the tribe,” signaling her status as a desiring/desired body “among her countrymen.” Her “zeal and eloquence,” inferring simultaneous gender, sexual, and social agency, permits her to speak and exert “authority.” However, this assumed “authority” does not function to direct the collective, “the tribe,” coded patriarchal. Instead, Deb’s “refractory” stance toward anti-colonialism implicates native women as the arbitrators of indigenous space, which her “countrymen…impiously abandon” in unquestioned submission. In declaring “her resolution to remain behind and maintain possession of the land,” Deb is granted solitary female agency to undo indigenous history’s past, present, and future, “negotiating…the dramatic social, economic, and cultural effects of colonization” by defiant un-removal (Fischer 61). Since, according to Amanda Lock Swarr, “time creates boundaries between self/other that replicate colonial distinctions of otherness and…[white] superiority,” Deb’s gendered agency and refusal to dislocate reapproximates and redefines categories of power and identification (120).
Although other scholars give Deb power and authority and see her as a key crux, their positions fail to consider how queer temporality disrupts the stagnancy of history—allowing for greater insight into indigenousness as part of transhistorical continuity, or the ways the indigenous subject can traverse history’s colonial demarcations. For example, Myra Jehlen elucidates that “Old Deb is a scourge to be driven out…but once banished, she returns to haunt the conquerors. Huntly’s psyche is a battlefield where savagery and civilization clash by night; but by day, Huntly…expects to inherit a farm his uncle built on Old Deb’s land” (165). For Jehlen, Old Deb serves as the catalyst for the novel’s postcolonial critique, emphatically denouncing settler colonialism. In The National Uncanny, Renee Bergland extends Jehlen’s reading, linking Brown’s spectral deployment of Old Deb to the mysterious fluidity of indigenous subjectivity:

[Old Deb], the leader of Edgar’s Indian enemies, is presented in…[many] guises. She is meant to be a real Indian: Edgar Huntly describes her as a woman who ‘originally belonged to the tribe of Delawares or Lenniennapee’ (197). She is also, indisputably, a cultural phantom; Huntly whimsically names her ‘Queen Mab’ in order to liken her to the ‘fairies’ widwife,’ queen of dreams and nightmares, who is described in Romeo and Juliet. The implication is that her measure of her own significance and political rights is delusional, but also that she is somehow correct about her importance—at least in the realm of delusions (54).

Here, Old Deb is cast in indeterminate terms, metaphorically functioning as the novel’s highly politicized agent of social and cultural transformation. Furthermore, in her other text about Edgar Huntly titled “Diseased States, Public Minds,” Bergland notes that Old Deb is “is invisible throughout the text. Nonetheless she is credited with directing the attacks of the…Indians who do appear. She may also direct the sleepwalker Huntly. Much of the violence takes place in her cottage…and on her land” (96-7). In fact, in Dreaming Revolution, Scott Bradfield goes as far to argue:
[Old Deb’s] property represents the final scene of Edgar’s colonial transgressions. He trespasses her ‘estate’ with the submerged awareness of a sleepwalker dreaming into existence his own savage life. By her ‘pretentions to royalty,’ [Old Deb] Queen Mab represents both a final destination and a perilous afterthought. By becoming like an Indian, Edgar stumbles onto the ultimate ground of his relentless colonial enterprise; he exceeds the Indians by exceeding himself. (32)

Here, Bradfield centralizes Old Deb to the study of the novel, refusing to relegate her to Norwalk’s outskirts, which is outside of the periphery of the colonial project’s operatives. Agreeing with and extending both Bradfield’s and Bergland’s assertions, Katy L. Chiles elucidates that Old Deb functions as a “trickster figure in Edgar’s retelling,” simultaneously exerting “sovereignty over [her] land” while assuming imagined “governmental power” (141). In all of the aforementioned examples, scholarly consensus seems to posit the novel as largely about the return of the repressed, the haunting specter of the Indian, and the Gothic exploration of colonialist violence. However, these positions situate history as a site of recoverability and knowability—and in doing so—relegate the Indian figure to the realm of symbolic anti-colonialism. Queer temporality, in contrast, allows for a greater consideration of indigenous subjectivity, space, and history, disrupting demarcations of past-present-future continuity and charting new terrain into the study of the postcolonial condition.

In fact, Deb’s relationship with her non-human companions also aids us in understanding how queerness and indigenous space operate in the novel. Deb’s reconceptualized civilization is built upon not only a rejection of colonialism, but also a refutation of the patriarchal logic that formed the basis of her “countrymen’s” (past) tribe. The destruction of the past and the formulation of the new present is created by Deb’s defiant actions: “This female burnt the empty wigwams and retired into the fastness of Norwalk” (179). In a moment reminiscent of colonialism’s destructive force to pillage and
burn, Deb redefines indigenous space and time by creating a future of dissimilarity and reimagination, relegating previous social and cultural formations to the margins. Through the creation of a new civilization, cast as utopia, Deb redefines kinship by bridging animal-human relations. Huntly recounts:

> Her only companions were three dogs, of the Indian or wolf species. These animals differed in nothing from their kinsmen of the forest, but in their attachment and obedience to their mistress. She governed them with absolute sway. They were her servants and protectors, and attended her person or guarded her threshold, agreeable to her directions. (179)

Here, Deb’s dogs are articulated as agents of anti-colonial discourse, demarcated from the uncivilized other by their “attachment and obedience to their mistress.” With agency to rule “with absolute sway,” Deb asserts her authority as an indigenous woman to create a queer utopia with “her servants and protectors.” As José Esteban Muñoz notes about queer utopia, its politics serve “a critical function that resonates like” a “temporal interruption” (*Cruising Utopia* 91). Queer utopia gives name to a “modality of critique…laden with potentiality”; “it is…a future…[of] anticipatory illumination” (91).

Thus, Deb’s assumed power jolts forward toward a future of unbecoming—toward a politics of dislocation that provides agency for the Indian subject. By establishing imagined hierarchies and structures of belonging and governance, Deb disarticulates settler colonialism’s desire to erase non-republican (non-white) social, cultural, and political formations.

Furthermore, Deb’s queer utopia is cast as a thorough disintegration of colonial binaries, namely of the civilized versus the savage, the wild versus the domesticated. Deb’s relationship with her dogs—and the limits and potentials of language and cross-species communication—are the primary conduits through which a defense (and
recuperation) of indigeneity is firmly codified in the novel. This approach actively participates and adds an important dimension to the critical debate of whether the novel celebrates Indian killing or is at its heart a critique of settler colonialism, bridging postcolonialism and gender/queer studies. As Isabel Hoving notes about women’s agency, language, and postcolonialism, “silence is often the privileged space through which the construction of subjectivity and the issue of representation is thought. But the concept of silence does not merely refer to the impossibility of (self-) representation” (27). Rather, according to Hoving, “it is also used to open a space where the counterdiscursivity and the materiality of the female postcolonial embodied self can begin to be written (27). On the level of narrative, Deb is silenced insofar as Huntly speaks on her behalf. On the level of plot development, Deb is also silenced in that her story exists and occurs on the outskirts of Norwalk. Yet, her unspeakable language—or rather, her unintelligible cross-species communication as defined as unintelligible by colonialism (embodied by Huntly)—enables a transfiguration of indigenous subjectivity to occur. As Huntly recollects:

Though in solitude, her tongue was never at rest but when she was asleep; but her conversation was merely addressed to her dogs. Her voice was sharp and shrill, and her gesticulations were vehement and grotesque. A hearer would naturally imagine that she was scolding; but, in truth, she was merely giving them directions. Having no other object of contemplation or subject of discourse, she always found, in their postures and looks, occasions for praise, or blame, or command. The readiness with which they understood, and the docility with which they obeyed her movements and words, were truly wonderful. (179-80)

In this striking passage, Huntly describes Deb’s “tongue” and “voice” through ambiguity and misrepresentation, occupying a spectrum of meaning incomprehensible to the colonial outsider, inverting the republican body politic’s dichotomy of self and other in
terms of colonial power dynamics. In lieu of the absence and search for speech as characteristic of the (post)colonial condition, Deb creates and authorizes her own form of cross-species communication, implicating her own “subject of discourse” into human and non-human social relations, thereby producing a “discourse” of hybrid (or transformative) indigeneity. Through “postures and looks,” Deb’s dogs—who are licensed more subjectivity than the other Indians in the novel who are killed off anonymously—signal a reimagined indigenous future, one “truly wonderful,” as Huntly mesmerizingly (and unknowingly/mistakenly) observes, of independence, reclamation, and renewal. The indigenous self, as imagined by Deb in her queer space and time, is not static and controllable; rather, it is a fluid construct of anti-(white republican) homogeneity.

By displacing the colonizing gaze through Deb’s discourse on transformative indigeneity, she compellingly queers language, community, and identity. Her dogs signal a reorientation of subjectivity and its markers of social and cultural belonging. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway argues that human/dog relationships are part of a “queer family of companion species” (11). She demonstrates how affective bonds between the human and non-human are forged through mutual reciprocity, bringing together “the human and non-human…freedom and structure, history and myth…and nature and culture in unexpected ways” (4). For Haraway, these relationships facilitate the disintegration of the border or binary between human and animal, forging hybrid subject positions through affective and social means. Echoing Haraway, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that “in reality the animal captured by man is [deterritorialized] by human force,” which “the [deterritorialized] animal force in
turn precipitates and intensifies the [deterritorialization] of the [deterritorializing] human force”—in short, the dog is becoming human (qtd. in MacCormack 100). In *Edgar Huntly*, Deb’s dogs defy colonial logic by inverting power structures through discourse.

As Huntly observes:

> If a stranger chanced to wander near her hut, and overhear her jargon, incessant as it was, and shrill, he might speculate in vain on the reason of these sounds. If he waited in expectation of hearing some reply, he waited in vain. The strain, always voluble and sharp, was never intermitted for a moment, and would continue for hours at a time. (180)

In analyzing the passage acoustically, Deb’s indigenous calls and responses to her canine companions is symbolic of subject formation, transfiguring the other (animal) into the agent, analogous to the drive for power in the postcolonial condition. In theorizing the monotony and persistence of the dog howls, we can read into the inverted other’s (colonialist’s) sense of hearing and listening, unable to make sense out of the temporal stagnancy of the non-human sounds, which function to disrupt normative (white) time and its sense of imposing authority to reveal, control, and subjugate. Deb’s dogs operate as agents of social capital and community, defiantly rejecting the correlative link between servant and master, and thereby charting out new terrain for a queer space of unfixed identity politics and egalitarianism.

Deb’s ability to reconceptualize indigenous subjectivity by blurring the boundaries between the human and non-human also operates to displace colonialism’s will to seize all aspects of native life. As Huntly notes about Old Deb:

> She conceived that by remaining behind her countrymen she succeeded to the government, and retained the possession of all this region. The English were aliens and sojourners, who occupied the land merely by her connivance and permission, and whom she allowed to remain on no terms but those of supplying her wants. (180)
Gayatri Gopinath’s recent work in *Impossible Desires* helps us to draw out the implications of Deb’s anticolonial conceptualization of space. For Gopinath, queer renderings of the anticolonial become a way to “recuperate those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional…nationalist imaginaries,” thereby referring to a “range of dissent” that works in “contradistinction” to the “colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all 'other'…communities…and practices against a model of” American-ness (11).

Old Deb, in her capacity to reject systems of power that relegate her as other, subverts the forces of settler colonialism by occupying a queer space and time. Establishing the English as “aliens and sojourners,” reorienting space and conquest and transforming white-Euro-America as other, Deb troubles and denaturalizes nationhood (and national belonging) by recuperating and reconsidering indigenous subjectivity from narratives—both real and imagined—of erasure.

Deb further disarticulates settler colonialism and conceptions of white national space by inverting logics of possession, seizure, and force. As Huntly recounts about Deb’s living space and arrangements:

This dwelling was of logs, and had been erected by a Scottish emigrant, who, not being rich enough to purchase land, and entertaining a passion for solitude and independence, cleared a field in the unappropriated wilderness, and subsisted on its produce. After some time he disappeared…[Some speculated] he had been murdered by the Indians, who, about the same period, paid their…visit to the Queen. This conjecture acquired…force, by observing that the old woman shortly after took possession of his hut, his implements of tillage, and his corn-field. (181)

Here, Deb reverses the narrative of indigenous dispossession, and instead hails the non-white subject as a force of disruption and dislocation. As J. Halberstam remarks *In
a Queer Time and Place, queer space and time are those “physical, metaphysical, and economic [locales]…that others have abandoned,” which thus enable the queer subject to occupy a state of indeterminancy (10). Moreover, Halberstam links queer temporality and spatiality to (post)colonization, arguing that “the histories of racialized peoples have been histories of immigration, diaspora, and forced migration” (8). Thus, the movement of the racialized queer subject between spaces enables the formation of, as Rebecca Fine Romanow explains, “new, queer spaces, never really ‘here’ and certainly no longer ‘there’” (7). Since Deb’s (past) indigenous collective was disavowed legitimacy through forced displacement, she occupies a postcolonial position of unbound potential. By seizing land from the “Scottish emigrant” through “force,” she becomes the subject of power instead of the object of it. At the same time, Deb’s claims to land are fluid, spectral, and mysterious, established as refusal—a refusal to embrace Huntly’s declaration of her queendom, implicating her within inverted colonial discourse. Instead, Deb’s queer space is best characterized by “conjecture,” or rather speculation or supposition over race, power, kinship, and authority.

Deb’s recuperation of indigenous subjectivity does not replicate the (white heterosexual) republican body politic and its claims to futurity. Rather, Deb’s social formation is woman-led, isolationist, and anti-reproductive (anti-community building), remapping the form, structure, and experience of society, which is audible and visible through culture, kinship, community, and affect, which Deb defiantly undoes. Thus, Deb, following Gopinath’s scholarship, creates an “alternative cartography,” disassociated from the universalizing social and cultural imaginary of white-Euro-America, charting new terrain for the production of queer subjectivities and spaces (12). Standing between
space and time, she resists anticipating an expected future, cued by the forces of colonialism. Instead, she embraces a defiantly undone future—fragmented, unexpected, and radical.

Deb’s anti-colonialism and cultural authority are further queered by Huntly’s disoriented navigation in indigenous time and space—a juncture of unbound potential for redefining power. While Deb’s appearance is mediated through Huntly’s speech and the confessional dynamic of epistolary correspondence (as the narrative is presented as one long letter to his fiancée), he creates a momentous textual shift in his narrative by fragmenting (colonial) memory. Huntly recalls toward the end of his narrative:

The hut where I had sought shelter and relief was, it seems, the residence of Queen Mab. Some fortunate occurrence had called her away during my visit. Had she and her dogs been home, I should have been set upon by these ferocious sentinels…and…killed…Her absence at this seasonable hour was mysterious…Was there a league between her and the plunderers whom I encountered? (182)

Here, Huntly’s entrance into the terrain of the undomesticated wilderness creates a schism between self and other. He is caught in between space and time, unable to ascertain power for the purposes of deflecting indigenous resistance and its wielding drive for livelihood and legitimacy, initiated through violent means. As a result, Huntly no longer sees himself as a unified self according to colonial hierarchies. Rather, the protagonist is lost at an inapproximate hour and place, unaware of his own being and becoming. While remembering (though un-unified) his own colonial histories of indigenous violence mapped onto anonymous Indian bodies, Huntly simultaneously disavows and attempts to un-remember his own participation which propel the murder-mystery plot forward.
Throughout the novel, Huntly’s delirium as he engages in indigenous stalking and murder, symbolically heightened when he wakes up with his bloody head touching a dead Indian, fuels the necessity for reading his navigation through non-colonial space and time queerly. As such, the novel, as J. Halberstam expressively describes *In a Queer Time and Place*, “queer[s] memory” by blurring Huntly’s “recording and tracing” of colonialism and subjective experience (161). Thus, following José Esteban Muñoz’s language in *Cruising Utopia*, Deb is deployed for the purposes of...[animating the] utopian impulse” for indigenous futurity (116). She disrupts Huntly’s memory of the past for the purposes of creating a queer time that anticipates an indigenous future. Deb’s hut haunts and frightens Huntly, but it also serves to disrupt logics of selfhood and belonging for the purposes of anti-colonial critique. Deb’s spectral self, fluid and shape-shifting, both real and imagined, works to disarticulate Huntly’s sense of power and authority, which unravels into paranoia, terror, obsession, and distrust as he is unable to navigate through the complex space of unmodified or unadulterated wilderness, situated in an alternative sphere of being and becoming.

Huntly’s attempts to reapproximate himself out of Deb’s queer time and space, thereby unlinking memory from temporality (or colonial responsibility), are shortsighted and futile. As Huntly laments, “I was supposed to have been bewildered in the mountains, and three days were said to have passed since my disappearance. Twelve hours had scarcely elapsed since I emerged from the cavern. Had two days and a half been consumed in my subterranean prison?” (182). Here, Huntly’s precise measurement of time and movement, from navigating through the “mountains” for “three days” to the “twelve hour” since he “emerged from the cavern,” function to reorient
Huntly from a space of illegitimacy into a space of recognition, tacitly linking the normative to (white) citizenship. Referring to Deb’s hut as a “subterranean,” or secret, clandestine, and concealed space, likened to a “prison,” Huntly desperately desires to inhabit a (hetero)normative time and space, implicated within the republican body politic's codified public sphere. Yet, as Huntly maneuvers through a fog of incoherence and mystery, driven to reinhabit and reassert colonial power—symbolic of his journey and return to his uncle’s farmstead in Solebury—he asserts: “I disdain[ed] to be outdone…by the Mohawk. I have ever aspired to transcend the rest of animals in all that is common to the rational” (183). For Huntly, rigid hierarchies of self and other provide him the stability to seek out a coherent subjectivity, which he desperately desires in striving to assert dominance and power.

Yet, Brown’s novel does not provide Huntly with an easy recuperation. In many ways, Old Deb is Huntly’s greatest (social, cultural, and political) nightmare, functioning as psychic turmoil by blurring the distinctions between civilization and savagery, exacerbated by the strong implication that Deb’s hut is the locus of guerrilla warfare against settler colonialism. Deb is at once driven out of her home, but she returns to haunt Huntly in ghostlike, spectral fashion, blurring, then, not only the distinction between civilization and savagery, but also the distinction between the phantasmal and the real as well. In fact, Huntly later develops immense paranoia over Deb’s diffuseness, symbolized by his imagined solitary war against the other. Huntly frighteningly states, “I was unacquainted with the number of enemies who had adventured into this district. Whether those whom I had encountered at Deb’s hut were of that band whom I had met with in the cavern, was…a topic of conjecture” (189).
Huntly’s “conjecture” over indigenous attacks, cast as speculation or supposition on the precipice, operates as an attempt to annihilate his past participation, and thereby past memory and history, in colonial violence. Yet, Deb as a haunting force refuses colonial time’s erasure. As Avery Gordon, a prominent scholar in ghost studies, conveys:

[H]aunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in past linear time, alters the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. (xvi)

Deb haunts Huntly, and in doing so, “alters the experience of being in past linear time,” disrupting the narrative of republican futurity and American unification in favor of a recast indigenous futurity rooted in an imagined queer time and place. Deb “trouble[s]” the American body politic’s desire to contain and preclude non-dominant or non-normative subjects, frequently relegated as objects, providing a useful conceptual link to queer theory’s investment in recuperating dissident others, cast outside of heteronormative frameworks. As Elizabeth Freeman aptly observes, “queer studies meets critical race theory and postcolonial studies in its understanding that what has not entered the historical records, and what is not yet culturally legible, is often encountered in embodied, nonrational forms: as ghosts” (“Introduction” 159). Thus, Old Deb, as an uncontainable force and indeterminately bound, channels the power of indigenous time and space to disorient and disintegrate Huntly’s colonial project, usurping the normalizing rule and control of the body politic. Living on the margins and “embodied” in the “nonrational” form of the ghost, Deb gives voice to (and thereby agency, power, and cultural capital to) marginalized others.
By the end of *Edgar Huntly*, the title protagonist learns the truth about Waldegrave’s murderer, who, though inexplicitly stated in the novel, orchestrated the murder on behalf of Old Deb. While Clithero was the initial suspect, as his narrative is one of the novel’s central supporting plotlines, Old Deb’s indirect participation essentially frames the novel’s entire conflict and propels the plot forward. The dénouement of the novel, characterized by violence and bloodshed, occurs near Deb’s hut, culminating in, as Huntly records in his sleepwalking delirium, “the Indians” being “successfully slain” (220). While on the surface level the novel appears to endorse complete indigenous disenfranchisement and obliteration, Huntly’s appended letters to Sarsefield, which function as an afterward of sorts, further contradict this dominant reading. Huntly writes: “I heard…that Deb’s hut found a new tenant. At first, I imagined that the Scotsman who built it had returned, but making closer inquiries, I found that the new tenant was my servant. I had no inclination to visit him myself” (245). Here, Deb’s fluid ghost-like self continues to haunt Huntly, inverting dynamics of power and place, disorienting the master and servant relationship (analogous to the racialized demarcation of self and other) in colonial renderings of hierarchy, organization, and civic order. Even with the absence of tangible Indian bodies, Deb’s queer time and place is omnipresent and reappears in cyclical fashion, providing Huntly and his colonial histories with targeted critique, disruption, resistance, and even combat. Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how reorienting queer approaches to *Edgar Huntly*—blending the postcolonial with queer temporality—afford new insight into the construction of indigenous subjectivity, agency, and collectivity without replicating colonialist fantasies of the other. Instead of exclusively focusing on the latent
homoeroticism between Huntly and Clithero, I turn toward Deb’s queer time and space in order to bring to life indigenous critiques of the American body politic, oftentimes articulated or framed around the spectral or intangible, which I extend to include a broad range of dissident, non-normative, and fluid constructs. My hope is that this chapter adds an important dimension to a growing body of scholarship on queer theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies for excavating the early American archive’s depiction and use of the indigenous subject into a productive queer figure of combat and critique. Deb’s queer time and space engages in the challenging project of unraveling the American body politic’s heteronormative and oppressive bent and impulse, functioning as a timely recuperation and reclamation.

**Notes**

1 See Leslie A. Fiedler’s classic study *Love and Death in the American Novel*, particularly the chapter “Charles Brockden Brown and the Invention of the American Gothic,” for a strong articulation of the early American Gothic.

2 Much scholarship exists on the novel’s use and treatment of sleepwalking. In *The Emergence of the American Frontier Hero: 1682-1826*, for example, Denise Mary MacNeil argues that since both Huntly and Clithero sleepwalk, they share an “affliction” which creates a sense of “doubling” in the novel, functioning as “part of the meta-presence of the text itself” (104). Conversely, Justine S. Murison links the novel’s deployment of sleepwalking to nationhood, arguing that “*Edgar Huntly* allows Brown to explore the consequences of the tendency in 1790s America to make citizenship—and national identity more broadly—a state of mind” (244).

3 The captivity narrative is one of the oldest literary forms in post-contact period America, dating back to the Puritans. According to Richard Slotkin, “the New England Indian captivity narrative functioned as a myth, reducing the Puritan state of mind and world view, along with the events of colonization and settlement, in archetypal drama” (94). Oftentimes these narratives followed a stringent formula—capture, suffering, escape or rescue—and positioned the Indian as uncivilized other, terrorizing the colonialists.

4 Important to note, Huntly also “sardonically” refers to Old Deb as Queen Mab, naming her after a fairy from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (Kafer 172). In fact, there has been scholarly attention paid to the naming of Old Deb/Queen Mab. For example, John Carlos Rowe argues that both names invoke “European traditions” (44). In fact, Old Deb appears to resemble a Christianized Indian name taken from the bible, *Judges* 4-5. As Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro emphatically declare in their 2006 Hackett edition of *Edgar Huntly*: “Deb appears in the novel as a personification of the Delawares and their historical dispossession, and both of her Anglicized names have rich associations that are relevant to the story” (138).
Recent scholarly studies of Charles Brockden Brown have begun to position his novels and other writing in terms of feminist, queer, and postcolonial thought. See, for example, the collection *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic*, edited by Philip Barnard, Mark Kamrath, and Stephen Shapiro.

Also see Caleb Crain’s *American Sympathy* for an innovative analysis of Brown’s depiction of manhood, male friendships, and nation.

See the 2011 anthology *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, edited by Ellen Lee McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, for productive scholarship on queer temporality and collectivity in film, literature, theater and performance, and philosophy.

For representative studies of property, colonialism, and economics in the novel, see Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds’s *Private Property: Charles Brockden Brown’s Gendered Economics of Virtue* and Chad Luck’s “Re-Walking the Purchase: Edgar Huntly, David Hume, and the Origins of Ownership.”

As Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro note in the 2006 Hackett edition of *Edgar Huntly*, “the banks of the Wabash and Muskingum” was representative of the broader Delaware Valley area, which comprises present-day eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey (136).

For representative historical scholarship on eighteenth century Native American histories, see Daniel R. Mandell’s *Behind the Frontier*, Nancy Shoemaker’s *A Strange Likeness*, Armstrong Starkey’s *European and Native American Warfare 1675-1815*, and Jean M. Obrien’s *Firsting and Lasting*.

Following Karl Kroeber’s definition, the trickster is “ubiquitous in Native American storytelling,” serving “not [as] a character but [as] a figure of speech. Trickster is a modality of spoken discourse: he facilitates the special sociability made possible by language.” “Native American peoples,” according to Kroeber, “imagined the trickster trope in a plentitude of forms, all simultaneously human and animal” (75).

CHAPTER 6
CODA: UNDOING BINARIES

In March 2015, I traveled to Los Angeles, California for the American Society of Eighteenth Century Studies (ASECS) Annual Meeting to present a condensed version of my chapter on black gallows literature and critical approaches to queer of color critique in early America. I presented my paper as part of a panel titled “Race, Colonialism, and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century.” The panel was organized and sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Caucus, a subgroup of the organization, which also sponsored a panel on “Transgender Studies and the Eighteenth Century.” When I arrived to my panel, I was greeted by a host of graduate students and faculty from both the U.S. and abroad, primarily the U.K., who were interested and invested in, just like me, the histories and study of gender and sexuality. I was slated to present last, so I listened attentively to the work of my fellow colleagues before heading up to the podium myself.

From analyses of masculinity in a plantation journal to sketches of sexual practices in eighteenth century Latin America, my colleagues presented on a wide array of primary texts in diverse geographic locales. However, a common methodology united all of their work, regardless of whether this methodology was explicitly stated or acknowledged or not—historicist. Thus, when I took my last sip of water before beginning to read my theoretically informed argument about race and sexuality, I felt, similar to Old Deb in Chapter 5, in a queer time and place, unable to locate myself within the panel’s academic discourse. My colleagues seemed confounded, puzzled, and perhaps even a bit perturbed by my approach to “Race, Colonialism, and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century,” unable to see how transhistorical work utilizing queer theory
can be beneficial for critically examining past genders and sexualities. To them, I was a queer anachronism, out of touch and out of time. In fact, during the discussion component of the panel, audience members hesitated to engage me. Finally, one panelist blatantly asked me why I used queer theory in the first place. Frustrated and perhaps a bit perturbed myself, I countered in jest: “You know, perhaps I’m not an early Americanist after all. Perhaps I’m just a theory guy who enjoys studying early American literature.”

While no one else engaged me after that, my remarks resonated with me both critically and reflexively. Was I really not an early Americanist because of my investment in queer theory? Is queer theory and early American literature really that incompatible with one another? My experience at ASECS, bordering on an existential crisis, was not unrepresentative of the current climate toward non-historicist approaches to the study of eighteenth century genders and sexualities. For example, the seminal journals in the field, such as Early American Literature, Literature in the Early American Republic, Eighteenth-Century Studies, and The Eighteenth Century are resistant to include theoretical scholarship from their publishing milieu. Dominantly conservative in methodology and content, these journals replicate exclusive historicist frameworks, and in doing so, provide narrow access points through which the histories of gender and sexuality are made accessible and knowable in their complex and multifaceted forms and manifestations.

After leaving the ASECS conference, I felt a sense of academic melancholia, a lingering sadness not unlike Eliza’s woeful expressions in The Coquette. I felt like an academic other, an outlaw of interpretation going against the grain of proper, or
normative, literary analysis. In my mind, I was unable to read straight, unable to locate my own subject position as a scholar, academic, and queer theorist in historical specificity. Despite my gloomy demeanor, I soon cheered myself up by revisiting Jordan Alexander Stein’s article “Mary Rowlandson’s Hunger and the Historiography of Sexuality,” published in American Literature in 2009, which served as one of the main inspirations for the composition of this dissertation project. Stein’s article, while rooted in seventeenth century Puritan literature, helped me to read and reread the histories of gender and sexuality as part of a larger transhistorical continuum. In his text, Stein productively demonstrates how the intangible realms of sexuality, notably the “cultivation of sensations,” are made legible and analyzable through queer theorization, rerouting scholarly attention from the knowability of the body’s materiality to the unknowable realms of non-normative gender and sexual experience and expression (469). In many ways, then, my dissertation heeded the call of Stein, layering onto to his larger project by expanding the archive to the eighteenth century social, cultural, literary, and political landscape. At the same time, I also redefined the archive and articulation of early American genders and sexualities—analogous to the ways Stein positions the captivity narrative as a surprising site of sexuality’s fluid expression—taking into account the multifaceted ways in which queer is deployed as a style, sensibility, temporality, space, feeling, and political apparatus in surprising archives ranging from criminal literature to the Gothic novel.

While I was attune to Stein’s call and eager to fill in the open scholarly gap in early American sexuality studies, my sense of academic isolation, a lone queer theorist in an inhospitable field, persisted until I discovered a landmark special issue of Early
American Studies titled Beyond Binaries: Critical Approaches to Sex and Gender in Early America, originally released in Fall 2014. In the introduction to the special issue, Rachel Hope Cleves provides an engaging rationale for the issue's title, explaining that “beyond the binary is descriptive rather than nominal,” allowing for a “longer approach,” bridging the past and the present, to the study of “sexual and gender diversity” in early America (461). Tackling the historicist and unhistoricist debates head on, the essayists in the special issue demonstrate a keen awareness of the field’s potential for transformative change. In her essay “Sex and ‘Unsex’: Histories of Gender Trouble in Eighteenth-Century North America,” for example, Greta LaFleur draws upon the foundational scholarship of queer theorist Judith Butler in order to demonstrate the “contingency and mutability of gender in eighteenth-century sources” (Cleves 462). LaFleur urges her readers to engage in a transhistorical project, bridging the critical gap between past and present. In doing so, she hopes her readers see the resonances between times, locating the 1790s as a moment of gender incoherence and permissibility in historical continuity. Conversely, in her article “From The Scarlet Letter to Stonewall: Reading the 1629 Thomas(ine) Hall Case, 1978–2009,” Kathryn Wichelns cautions against presentist approaches to histories of gender and sexuality. In tracing the shifting historiography on the Hall trial, a case about gender ambiguity in colonial Virginia, Wichelns “points to the risks of carrying an unconscious presentist sensibility to subjects who do not fit into recognized categories” (Cleves 463). In both scholarly texts, the unhistoricist and historicist debates are replicated and (re)codified, yet they also appear to engage in a productive dialog with one another about how to effectively undo history’s binaries and the many forms of gender, sexual, social, and erotic life.
To me, the debates foregrounded and explicated in the issue were refreshing and timely, renewing my hope in the field as it continues to grow, expand, and perhaps even redefine itself. In ending her introduction, Cleves emphasizes the need for inventive approaches to the study of early American genders and sexualities. She elucidates,

The work is out there; now we need to shift our paradigms to acknowledge that in early America gender [and sexuality] was contingent and flexible, much as it is appears to us today. We cannot and should not shoehorn early American history into an assumed binary rigidity that flatters the present but misapprehends the past. (467)

Cleves’s call to undo “binary rigidity” and to fracture stagnant conceptions of time is precisely what “Queer Theory and America’s Revolutionary Crisis” strove to accomplish. In the same way the essayists in Beyond Binaries engaged in a productive dialog, reframing discourse and historiography, I, too, sought to engage in a debate of disruptive and ideologically-shattering potential. Since the subfield of early American sexuality studies is still very new, my hope is that this dissertation adds an important intervention into the deployment and use of queer theory for illuminating and gaining insight into genders and sexualities in past-present continuity. Queer theory and early American literature, while a seemingly paradoxical grouping, fuel the need for unraveling the body politic’s normalizing impulse, recovering those past peoples, places, and ideas on the margins or outskirts of civic society.


Pettengill, Claire. “Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere: Female Friendship in Hannah Webster Foster’s The Coquette and the Boarding School.” Early American Literature 27.3 (1992): 185-203.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Justin Grant graduated summa cum laude from Purchase College, State University of New York in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature and minor in lesbian and gay studies. He earned his Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Florida in 2012. He earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree from the same program in 2015. Grant currently serves on the Writing and Rhetoric Program faculty in the Department of English at Florida International University in Miami.