Project
MUSE®
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

BRUCE BURGETT *University of Washington at Bothell*

REVIEW ESSAY

The History of *x* in Early America

Rape and Sexual Power in Early America
SHARON BLOCK
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006
276 pp.

Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830
CLARE A. LYONS
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006
420 pp.

In 2001, I served on the steering committee for the conference Sexuality in Early America, 1500–1820. Co-sponsored by two major institutional forces in the study of early American history and culture, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, this conference was designed to address the general neglect of the history of sexuality in the field of early American studies. Here is how the original call for papers set the stage:

> In the last two decades, the history of sexuality has emerged as an important and dynamic field of inquiry. By historicizing matters once understood as universal and eternal, scholars have connected sexual behaviors and desires to specific political, social, and economic contexts. Many have discovered links between this seemingly private realm of human experience and broader structures of power. Still others have questioned the coherence of the category of sexuality itself. With few exceptions, early American scholars have remained on the margins of this new field. Mindful of this omission, the . . . conference aims to examine the relationship between sexuality (defined broadly to include

desire, behavior, and attitudes) and the conditions and institutions of early American society (also defined broadly to include New France, the Caribbean, and the Spanish borderlands).

Notable here are several now familiar overarching motifs: the naming of the history of sexuality as a new and important academic field; the insistence on a historical approach to the study of matters once considered universal and private; the gesture toward linkages between those intimate matters and macro-level analyses of power; the positioning of the research to be presented at the conference as a corrective to previous omissions; the somewhat uneasy assertion of a temporal range contained by the years 1500–1820 and informed by present-day concerns, as well as a geographical scope that is American in both the national and the transnational senses of the term.

These stage directions also reflect some interesting negotiations that had taken place behind the scenes. When the original call for papers was circulated among the members of the conference steering committee, I had responded by suggesting that we might want to include a solicitation for research that called into question the utility of the categories of "sex" and "sexuality" for research conducted on historical materials that did not deploy those terms as we do today. This suggestion struck me as uncontroversial at the time, as I was drawing not only on the insights of Michel Foucault and his many commentators but also on research clustered around the rubric of queer theory which had suggested, throughout the 1990s, that we need to think carefully and politically about the instability of those categories as we investigate bodily and intimate practices that travel across geographic regions and historical periods. Yet my suggestion created a flurry of email. Some steering committee members worried that the inclusion of this emphasis in the call for papers would move the conference in a less historical direction; others were concerned that questioning the heuristic value of the concepts organizing the conference would undercut its coherence and focus, and could even return the emergent field of the history of sexuality to the margins of academic study. The result was an inclusion in the call for papers of the short sentence, "Still others have questioned the coherence of the category of sexuality itself."

At the conference, the tension between these two different, though not necessarily opposed, approaches to the history of sex and sexuality created

some interesting effects. The conference papers ranged over a wide array of topics that could be generally categorized as sexual, while the responses to those papers consistently raised the question of what was gained and lost by the deployment of sexuality as an organizing category. In part, I am to blame. In my response to one set of presentations, later published along with selected papers from the conference in a special issue of *The William and Mary Quarterly*, I noted that Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defined the terms "sex" and "sexual" as referencing what we think of today as "gender," while the verb "to sensualize" most closely approximated our contemporary use of the term "sexuality": "to make sensual, to subject to the love of sensual pleasure; to debase by carnal gratifications; as sensualized by pleasure." My intent was neither pedantic nor nominalist. Webster's association of sensuality with debasement indicates the category's embeddedness in the long history of the civilizing process, including the associated histories of class formation, chattel slavery, settler colonialism, gender and intimacy, and processes of racialization. Our research task, I suggested, may be less to map the intersections among the history of sexuality and those adjacent histories, and more to understand how, when, and where sexuality began to be problematized as having a history of its own—and how, when, and where it did not (185–89).

Other responses joined this refrain. Susan Juster, in her comments from the conference, drew on an archive of passionate spiritual devotionals and suggested that we ought to become more skeptical about our post-Freudian tendency to locate sexuality as a primal drive—the "itch behind all of our scratchings," to quote her lovely phrase—if we are to understand the historical and, I would add, the contemporary relations between desire and longing, passion and eros (203–7). Stephen Shapiro, in his comments, insisted that the second half of the eighteenth century marked a period in which the forms of subjectivity we associate today with sexuality were far from commonplace: "[T]he normative subject in the eighteenth century was not defined by a sexual identity, but by a range of superficial, sensual tendencies" (189–93). Kirsten Fischer and Jennifer Morgan warned against any complacency concerning who and what should and should not be included within an archive of sexuality (197–99), while Anne Myles cited the writings of Eve Sedgwick as advocating an "experimental and perceptual notion of performative, filiative—and affiliative—identities . . . as a lens for examining the development of sexual subjectivity and sexual agency"

(199–203). But it was Michael L. Wilson who went the furthest. In his concluding remarks on the final day of the conference, he cited a passage from the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (quoted at length from a copy he had purchased earlier that morning at the University of Pennsylvania bookstore), to make the point that many social, cultural, and literary historians have "remained too much inside the terms of . . . sexual science" and to advocate for a more "speculative" and "diffuse historiography of sexuality" (193–97).

These responses to the research presented at the conference are varied, but they reflect widespread fissures among scholars who study historical and contemporary practices of sex, formations of sexuality, and processes of sexualization. These fissures are sometimes mapped as dividing social from literary historians or, more parochially, history from English department faculty, though it is never quite that simple. In an essay published nearly a decade earlier in 1994, Lisa Duggan located the same tensions between gay and lesbian historians and queer theorists. Like Fischer, Morgan, and Wilson, she noted that conventional social historical methodologies are ill-equipped to construct a critical history of sexuality, by which I mean a history of sexuality that places its own ideological and identity categories under suspicion. But she was equally damning in her appraisal of self-identified queer theorists who distance themselves from historical methods by presenting such approaches as naively empiricist. The real problem is the lack of engagement between the two sides of this polarity: social historians of sexuality, meaning scholars in any field who rely on social historical methods, remain comfortably unaware of queer theory, while queer theorists, again in any field, often seem comfortable citing only continental theory, even as they draw on U.S. and American historical archives and the work of U.S. and American historians. That the site of Duggan's intervention was not the history of sexuality in general, but gay and lesbian history in particular marks her engagement not only with the academy's internal divisions but also with broader questions concerning the relation between knowledge production within the academy and the activist intellectual and political formations that necessarily traverse its borders.

In many ways, Sharon Block's *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* and Clare A. Lyon's *Sex among the Rabble* are extensions of these debates within and across diverse fields, including early American studies. Block was one of the co-organizers of the Sexuality in Early America confer-

ence, along with Kathleen Brown, and Lyons presented her research at it. Both monographs were published in 2006 through the ongoing collaboration between the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press. Positioned alongside other recent work by scholars such as Patricia Cline Cohen (1999), Richard Godbeer (2004), and Martha Hodes (1999, 2007), all of whom sat on the steering committee for the 2001 conference, these two publications mark a significant thickening and enriching of the social historical record. As Block and Brown note in their introduction to the special issue of *The William and Mary Quarterly*, the history of sexuality in early America has come a long way from the days when bawdy tales appeared in the "Trivia" section of the *Quarterly*. They even go so far as to suggest that "the history of sexuality *is* early American history," a bold claim they immediately mitigate by adding the more modest assertion that "[s]cholars of print culture, politics, colonialism, race, and the Atlantic world can learn something new about their own fields from [the] articles" in the special issue (5–13). So I am left wondering after revisiting the papers from 2001 conference and reading these two monographs, is sex really the *x* that completes the history of early America? If we share the desire to construct a new field devoted to history of this variable, either in early America or elsewhere (an *if* to which I will return), then there can be no doubt that Block and Lyons point us in the right direction.

Sex among the Rabble is the more comprehensive of the two volumes, and the one that stakes the more straightforward claim on the history of sexuality. Though limited in scale to Philadelphia during the period 1730–1830, Lyons's research draws on a wide range of archives: court, church, and social agency records that trace changes in colonial and early national understandings of bastardry, illegitimacy, and prostitution; newspaper advertisements and legal documents that index the history of self-divorce and marriage practices; popular print sources ranging from broadsides to novels that evince the interpenetration of private affairs and public culture. Her interpretive method is equally capacious, mixing traditional social historical strategies designed to reconstruct the everyday lives of the residents of Philadelphia and cultural historical tactics that view the production and circulation of representations as actively shaping those lives. The resulting narrative is divided into three parts. The first maps what Lyons calls the "vibrant pleasure culture" of mid-eighteenth-century Philadelphia as an

environment in which the city's residents socialized freely across class and race lines, lived within a flexible gender system, and allowed for a wide array of sexual expression, including casual and non-marital sexual relations (1). The second moves to the late eighteenth century when this dynamic pleasure culture mixed with democratic and revolutionary ideologies of personal happiness and republican self-determination, creating the possibility of greater sexual and political autonomy for all Philadelphians, and especially for women. The third shifts to the early nineteenth century when an emergent middle-class elite began to foreclose these heterogeneous possibilities by deploying sex and sexuality as the means of policing and securing the stratification class, race, and gender relations.

There is much to admire in this study and a brief summary cannot possibly do it justice. Clearly, Lyons invites us to cast aside conventional images of Philadelphia as an orderly city overseen from the outset by prim and chaste Quakers. Her meticulous archival work and inventive interpretive strategies reveal instead a world in which those representations may have reflected the desires and shaped the archives of the Quaker elite, but were always and everywhere contested and contradicted by everyday practices of sociality and sexuality. Here's one example. In her discussion of self-divorce in the mid-eighteenth century, Lyon draws on some predictable source materials—newspaper advertisements and cases recorded by the Overseers of the Poor—to demonstrate that husbands used published advertisements to end unwanted marriages. Rather than portraying this practice as evidence of the power of the patriarchal order, Lyons adds to the picture her research on women's published counter-assertions of false advertisement in order to reconstruct forms of agency that exceeded patriarchal control. The lesson learned is that women not only contested their husbands' false claims of desertion or elopement but also used the practice of public advertisement to carve out individual and collective sources of autonomy and self-determination. "These representations," Lyons concludes in a discussion of the popular print culture that accompanied the public practices of self-divorce, "suggest, not an anxiety over the stability of the patriarchal gender order, but rather the inability—or difficulty—of establishing it at all" (43). This is social history of the highest quality. Along with similar reconstructions of the histories of bastardry and prostitution, Lyons recreates a world in which power was negotiated and contested among all of the residents of Philadelphia through everyday practices that

were reducible neither to top-down systems of control nor to bottom-up relations of resistance.

Beneath Lyons's narrative, however, one still senses the lingering tension between the two approaches to the history of sexuality that emerged at the Sexuality in Early America conference in 2001. On the one hand, *Sex among the Rabble* is a history of sexuality in the positivist sense of the term. It tells the story of how sexuality—understood as an *x*, a variable, a thing in the world—shaped and was shaped by the lives and practices of Philadelphians between 1750 and 1830. This is what holds the book together, making it something other than three overlapping studies of self-divorce, bastardry, and prostitution. The rhetorical glue is provided by the use of the adjective "sexual" in sentences like this one: "The frequency of bastardry, sex commerce, and sexually transmitted diseases suggests that *sexual* relations outside of courtship and marriage were a regular part of the *sexual* terrain" (60–61, my italics). On the other hand, Lyons's source materials and, at times, her analysis in *Sex among the Rabble* suggest a history of how sexuality came to be understood as an *x*, a variable, a thing in the world. Rather than assuming its positive existence as an isolable object of investigation, mode of relationship, or terrain of practice, Lyons's research points toward the ways in which sexuality emerged as a social problem in the context of classed, gendered, and racialized struggles over power. Consider this passage drawn from Lyons's discussion of the early nineteenth-century "assault on nonmarital sexuality": "Sex had also become the linchpin in the logic of a new gender system under construction by the emerging urban middle class. Gender difference, this new conceptual framework asserted, was based in the anatomical differences between men and women and in distinct male and female forms of sexual desire and deportment" (309). Sexuality appears here as a historical project, a discursive and political formation that localized struggles over gender and class relations within a moral economy that was (and still remains) only contingently sexualized.

Sharon Block's *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* shares with *Sex among the Rabble* the claim on the history of sexuality in early America, yet is less comprehensive in its ambitions. Though national rather than regional in scale, Block's research focuses on the history of rape and sexual coercion as only one aspect of power relations between men and women in the period. While Block does occasionally represent this particular aspect of those relations as an element within a more totalizing history of sexu-

ality, this claim is not central to her analysis. Instead, she focuses on the creation and interpretation of an archive that ranges from legal records and court transcripts to print fiction and popular humor, one that was compiled from twenty-five historical societies and includes more than nine hundred separate cases. As Block notes in one particularly impressive chapter on the naturalization of rape within a world that assumed that women would resist sexual intercourse as a normal stage of courtship, this decision to include documents from the larger culture alongside those drawn from the legal record is critical since a narrow concern with successful prosecutions as providing the only record of rape merely repeats that naturalization (16–52). In another excellent chapter focused specifically on prosecutions for the crime of rape, Block reads back through the legal archive, tracing individual cases through county court records to discover where and why distinctions between sexual and nonsexual assault were and were not made (126–62). The result is a history that provides detailed accounts of those instances of sexual coercion that eventually were prosecuted as rape and a convincing portrait of the broader social and political environments in which distinctions between coercion and consent, assault and rape, were and were not drawn.

Block's commitment to this exemplary integration of legal, social, and cultural historical methods pays its greatest dividends in the final chapters of the book where she turns her attention toward the myriad ways in which accusations of (and prosecutions for) rape were embedded within (and mediated by) shifting relations and representations of race, gender, and class. Focusing in these chapters on what she refers to as the "Americanization of rape," Block emphasizes how rape and its cultures worked to discipline women and men in working-class and racialized populations, in part by misrepresenting any non-middle-class courtship rituals as evidence that a woman had invited sex and in part by shielding elite white men from prosecution by non-elite and non-white women. These tendencies reached an extreme in the formal establishment of separate "white" and "black" court systems for individuals accused of serious crimes, but their underlying assumptions could be felt across all spheres of society (163–209). Whether these trends are particular to "America" (read: "United States")—rather than generally true of settler colonies—is a question Block does not resolve. (She even suggests the reverse by including evidence from Barbados and the West Indies in an otherwise convincing contrast

of British and U.S. legal reforms [149–68].) But it is clear that her careful archival and interpretive work, like that of Lyons in *Sex among the Rabble*, points toward a significant advance in our understanding of how sexuality emerged in the early nineteenth century as an increasingly intense site where power could be localized, embodied, and contested, particularly with regard to the heightened tendency in the mid-nineteenth century to trace all crime, including the crime of rape, to a sexual cause.

Given this history, it is all the more remarkable that *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* also shares with *Sex among the Rabble* an ambivalence in its treatment of sexuality not only as a historically produced category but also as category of historical analysis. Block clearly knows that the emergence of sexuality as an analytically discrete variable in contemporary historical research—an *x* in early America studies—is deeply implicated in that history. In fact, this is one of the core insights she names as having motivated her research in the first place. In the only passage in the book where she explicitly links her research to contemporary feminist discussions of rape, Block notes the paradox: "Decades of feminism have schooled Americans to view rape as a crime of violence, not a sexual act run amok. Yet, from an historical perspective, the insistence that rape is an act of patriarchal violence obscures much of the early American conceptions of sexual assault" (51). In a parallel passage from the conclusion to *Sex among the Rabble*, Lyons notes that her research was inspired by a desire to "address the interwoven strands of racial, gender, and economic oppression evident in the sexual subordination of women in the contemporary United States" (395). Each of these passages reflects the turn within feminism over the past two decades, both inside and outside the academy, toward intersectional forms for analysis that do not treat any one vector of power in isolation from others. Yet Block and Lyons retain a commitment to preserving the autonomy of sexuality as one of those vectors. The outcome is a braid woven of discrete threads, not an analysis of how those threads came into being in the first place.

My point in drawing attention to this tension and tendency in *Sex among the Rabble* and *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* is not to reify a hard and fast line between positivist and post-positivist approaches to the history of sexuality. Rather, I want to use the friction between these approaches to index two enduring problems within that field of study. The first problem circles around the question of what an archive of sexuality

does and should include. It is notable that neither Lyons nor Bloch has much to say about intimate or bodily relations and practices in the eighteenth century beyond those that took place between men and women, though I should note that Lyons has published her essay "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," originally presented at the Sexuality in Early America conference, in Thomas A. Foster's edited volume *Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (2007). It could be that this oversight results from the limitations of the historical record, yet the relevant archives are indexed in the margins of both studies. Lyons notes in an aside that she lumps together the "celibate" and the "non-procreative" due to her reliance on records of bastardry to document Philadelphia's urban pleasure culture (90); Block explicitly limits her working definitions of "rape" and "coerced sex" to instances of "forced heterosexual intercourse" (2–3), even as she draws on narratives that include instances of same-sex coercion such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (68–74). No single historical study can be all things to all people, and I do not want to suggest that either Lyons or Block should have added another chapter or two. But the trouble, here and elsewhere, is that the general category of sexuality works against efforts to specify the acts, practices, identities, and behaviors that are and are not under consideration in any given instance.

The second problem concerns the term I am sure this review has conjured for any historically minded reader: presentism. Typically, the term operates within conventional forms of historiography to draw a firm boundary between the concerns of the present and the alterity of the past, as in Block's worry that contemporary feminist activism around rape could make us misapprehend eighteenth-century practices of coercion and consent. Am I suggesting that Lyons and Block should be less presentist, that their studies risk imposing post-Freudian thinking on pre-Freudian archives? Or am I suggesting that their studies could be more presentist, that they should take into fuller account early twentieth-first-century understandings of sex and sexuality, especially those that have emerged from queer theory and queer studies? The answer is neither. All history is presentist in the sense that it is written in the present, written about the past, and written with an eye toward the future. This observation should be commonsense to anyone with any historical training. But it does not mean that the present, past, and future are singular. Like the individuals studied by Lyons and Block,

we live today in a moment of great turbulence with regard to the politics and cultures of what many of us have come to think and talk about as sex and sexuality. One effect of this turbulence is that the "we" I have invoked throughout this review cannot be understood as unified since it joins, as a rhetorical convenience, scholars with commitments to a wide range of social, intellectual, professional, and political formations, both inside the academy and across its boundaries. This heterogeneity was evident at the 2001 conference and I have made at least some of my own commitments clear, in this review and elsewhere. While it may be true that *x* sounds like sex, I remain unconvinced that treating sex as a variable provides those of us who research, teach, and write about the history of sexuality with our best access to the past, our most insightful accounts of the present, or our most ambitious visions of the future.

WORKS CITED

Block, Sharon, and Kathleen M. Brown, eds. "Sexuality in Early America." Special issue of *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60.1 (January 2003).

Cohen, Patricia Cline. *The Murder of Helen Jewett*. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Duggan, Lisa. "The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Gay and Lesbian History." *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture, Tenth Anniversary Edition*. Ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter. New York: Routledge, 2006. 185–95.

Lyons, Clare A. "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia." *Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*. Ed. Thomas A. Foster. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2007. 164–203.

Godbeer, Richard. *Sexual Revolution in Early America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004.

Hodes, Martha. *The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Norton, 2007.

———. *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999.