

*Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies*

**Greta LaFleur**, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781421426433 (cloth); ISBN: 9781421426440 (ebook)

Greta LaFleur's *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* coins the phrase "environmental sexuality" to explicate the ways in which developing spatial, temporal, and biological discourses in the 18<sup>th</sup> century coalesce and situate subjects in the early American republic. LaFleur places environmental sexuality against contemporary notions of sexual identity, noting how modern views do not map onto 18<sup>th</sup> century understandings of the body and the subject. Her text uses the 18<sup>th</sup> century paradigm in which the natural world is the epistemological frame for understanding the human body to explicate texts from after the British enlightenment through the American post-Revolutionary era to examine the role of the environment in the discursive imbrication of sex, sexuality, and – centrally and notably – race. While a literature scholar by training, LaFleur's broad and exciting rethinking of the role that place, space, and nature play in understanding the early American subject opens up a new theoretical frame for fields like historical geography, geographies of sexuality, Black geographies, Indigenous geographies, and political ecology more broadly.

LaFleur's archive draws from early natural historical writing, travel writing, religious and judicial writing, Revolutionary-era war literature, and pamphlets about urban life, though her analysis is much further reaching as her critical intervention is grounded in both an early Americanist and queer theory based approach. Starting with work by scholars of 18<sup>th</sup> century literature like Felicity Nussbaum, she engages many later Americanists like Ezra Tawil and Katy Chiles as she reinjects discussions of racial discourse into her theory of sexual practices, expounding on what she calls "*the sexual politics of racial difference*" (p.4). This orientation

towards the enmeshed but inchoate systems of race/ethnicity, religion, gender, and biology allow her to focus on the impact that the environment had on bodies and practices in her archive.

LaFleur draws particularly on botanist Carl Linnaeus' work cataloging human variation as a way to open up the discussion of human sexual variation as an environmentally produced phenomenon. Linnaeus's writing, in which humans are divided into four classes with phenotypic and characterological differences based on geographic origin, influenced the political theories of Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith, and other foundational republican writers who in turn were in conversation with "Barbary captivity narratives, execution narratives, cross-dressing narratives, and anti-vice narratives" (p.5). The author's prescient pairing and analysis of early American texts is enlivened by fresh insights regarding the application of current literary and social theory to historical frameworks. While making exciting connections to canonical queer theory writers like Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, Judith Butler, and Leo Bersani, she also draws on a variety of other disciplines, citing queer of color critique scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz, Sharon Holland, Roderick Ferguson, and David Eng, as well as work by LGBTQ historians such George Chauncey and Lisa Duggan. LaFleur's archive is predominantly white-authored, but her own citational politics are consistent as she deliberately includes authors of color and links her analysis to the foundational work of early African American critical race scholars (Hortense Spillers, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis) in what can be a very white field. Her bibliography reads as a thrilling cross-disciplinary "who's who" of contemporary theory and historical analysis (Sara Ahmed, Jane Bennett, Caroline Gonda, Jasbir Puar, Mark Rifkin – and it continues) which, while staying focused on the early US, doesn't exclude connections to other international frames. In so doing, she brings necessary contemporary critical attention to the political and philosophical ramifications of this interrelationship of sex/practice/race in her 18<sup>th</sup> century primary texts.

The book is organized temporally and geographically, beginning with relatively far-flung Barbary captivity narratives at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of natural historical thought and homing in on the nascent United States towards the end of the Revolutionary War

era. As LaFleur's theory finds footholds in the emerging racialized and gendered bodies and practices of the expanding trans-Atlantic and colonial landscape, the links between person and place proliferate. The first chapter of *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* defines her framework as she traces the development of the environment in proto-scientific writing, political theory, and settler-colonial travel writing. This chapter focuses on the body, arguing that the 18<sup>th</sup> century body was subject to its environment and governing influences rather than its innate characteristics. Chapter Two concretizes her rather abstract view of the subject and begins to flesh it out in her examination of Christian captivity narratives, focusing in particular on anxieties about sodomitical practices which tied deviant sexual practice to racialized otherness. In this chapter, she takes an invigorating look at the "Christian turned Turk", examining the genre's fascination/repulsion around the genital-horror of the conversion process. Her theory of environmental sexuality allows the genre to become a commentary on racial otherness and sexual vulnerability of the Christian body.

LaFleur then resituates those fears within the colonial American landscape in her third chapter, "'Egyptian Lusts' at the Gallows", in which she reads the concept of "habit" in early American criminal biography to examine aberrant sexual practices and the further entanglement of race and sexual deviance. As well as addressing the malleability of race as a concept in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and its unfixed but associative relationship with morality and other indicators of sexual practice, LaFleur explicates the environmental ramifications of "habit", especially sexual habits (e.g. masturbation) which acclimate the vulnerable body to sin. Larger-scale sexual crime in society is then a product of exposure to foreign bodies for whom sin is innate.

The fourth chapter returns to the Linnaean roots of the book's analysis, comparing the popular genres of botany and of female cross-dressing narratives from around the time of the Revolutionary War. LaFleur takes botany's central tenet – that sexual behavior could be used to define new species – and uses it to situate the social response to sapphic behavior and sexual difference in the story of Deborah Sampson. Sampson, a semi-fictionalized figure with a highly contested historical record as a married cross-dressing soldier in the Revolutionary War and

Ohio frontiersman, becomes a link between the emergence of new sexual forms and a new settler-colonial nation. Sampson, and her masculine acts of valor in war and in killing Native men, becomes a natural product of her unnatural environment which “indigenizes” (p.139) her to her new country. Particularly because of the difficulty in locating and naming lesbian erotics in texts of this time period, this chapter quickly became a favorite as it successfully navigates Sampson’s potentially transgender identity within the language of the time, while also tying that instability to the racialized violence of the American frontier.

The fourth chapter’s spatial focus becomes more pronounced in the fifth chapter, “‘Negro Hill’ and the Sexuality of Space”, focusing on Boston’s turn-of-the-century vice district. LaFleur argues that vice becomes understood as “not only a spiritual problem but also a spatial one that could be addressed by strategic urban planning and other forms of city infrastructure” (p.165). The author positions her archive here as immediately anterior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century boom in sexology and criminology, as well as the rise of urban reform movements. She says environmental sexuality points to aberrant sexual practice as endemic to “*spaces and places*, rather than specific peoples” (p.172), such that simply by entering a defined area, the body became vulnerable to sexual peril. Because of the imbrication of aberrant sexual practice and race, then, “[b]lackness is presented as neither an anatomical nor a characterological detail, but rather a social one ... it becomes an organic, bacterial, or vital entity in and of itself ... coloring the architecture, the social landscape, and even the people” (p.180). LaFleur then traces the folding-in of this ideology on itself as she notes the early 19<sup>th</sup> century shift towards viewing bodies as anatomically rather than socially produced; this in turn *requires* “moral” urban infrastructures to prevent sinful behavior – which, of course, necessitates the rise of global missionary tactics to implement.

The book’s final chapter reads as a primer on contemporary queer theory and adjacent fields, providing an exciting and much-needed pathway for connecting historical studies to important current debates about the queer subject. While remaining focused on the implications for environmental sexuality, LaFleur offers an invigorating insight into the future of queer

theory, saying “what makes queer theory ‘queer’ is that it presumes a fundamental instability at the level of the subject” (p.201) and arguing convincingly that her work allows this kind of instability to be reintroduced to the field.

*The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* is a breath of fresh air and should be read by folks in any 18<sup>th</sup> century studies field, as well as scholars interested in thinking about the modern subject as a product of historical discourses. LaFleur’s text pushes beyond historiography to bring disparate and lively critical discussions to bear on a rich archive. Geographers in particular will appreciate her fourth and fifth chapters for their more explicit analysis of subjects in early urban and colonial spaces (though the preceding chapters shouldn’t be skipped).

It was a struggle for me to isolate any serious flaws in this book: this is the kind of work that 18<sup>th</sup> century studies needs. However, therein lies the problem: those without a background in the field, or a closely related field, may find that the book has a rather high barrier to entry. This book is not an introduction to 18<sup>th</sup> century literary forms, nor is it an introduction to queer theory. Though not esoteric, the learning curve would be quite steep for readers who are unfamiliar with either the artistic and historical movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or the fundamentals of contemporary queer theory and their application to literature and historical cultural studies. For that more familiar audience, LaFleur’s writing is highly readable without forgoing richness, and her approach of using concentrated case studies as microcosms of larger historical and critical discourses is highly successful. The drawback of this approach is that without a prior sense of how these microcosms relate to the larger 18<sup>th</sup> century (and beyond), this book might not feel as concatenated as it actually is. That being said, the writing is accessible and engrossing as LaFleur deftly maneuvers antiquated terminology and contemporary theory to deliver an eminently quotable and exhilarating text.

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of Geography

# ANTIPODE

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*April 2019*