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A QUEER HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

MICHAEL BRONSKI

REVISIONING AMERICAN HISTORY

BEACON PRESS BOSTON

Early colonial life in the northern continent was a mass of contradictions. It was extraordinarily intolerant, yet often surprisingly lax. The European settlers' relations to the native peoples ranged from murderous genocide to a complex series of eroticized relationships. While Europeans brought with them a persecuting society, the manifestations of that society took many forms. One of the lasting legacies of colonial social and legal culture was the application of laws prohibiting and punishing sexual activity between people of the same sex. Treating some sexual behaviors differently because potentially they had less impact on the community had a twin effect on future American culture. It gave rise to the social (and eventual legal) concept of "consenting adults" and to a domestic-based idea of privacy that offered protections to some people at certain points in history.

This concept of privacy, however, had another, damaging, impact on future social convention and law. By assigning sexuality to a private sphere, it prevented any public acknowledgment or discussion of almost all sexual activity. Thus it laid the groundwork for same-sex sexual behaviors and identities to be hidden and even considered shameful. While the Puritans rejected what they saw as sexual license or overt licentiousness in British culture, they fully accepted the role of sexuality and sexual desire in everyday life. This sharp divide—not exactly a contradiction, although it may have appeared so later, as sexual mores in American culture became more lenient—has remained a basic tenet of America's cultural life. The tension between the needs and demands of society and the decisions of an individual to live her or his life as part of, yet separate from, the community informed the four centuries that followed Europeans arriving in this foreign land.

TWO

SEXUALLY AMBIGUOUS REVOLUTIONS

The transition from the colonial period to the Revolutionary era, during which a daring political experiment took root, led to the emergence of a new nation. Fundamental to this new nation was the reshaping of ideas about gender and sexual behavior as they related to the political concept of the citizen.

The period from the Pilgrims' landing to the early eighteenth century was a time of enormous population growth. In 1700 the Anglo-European population in the Northeast was 250,000. By 1720 that number had almost doubled to 475,000. This surge in population was accompanied by the rapid growth of cities—by 1725 the population of Boston was over 12,000, nearly doubled from 6,700 in 1700; Philadelphia was home to 10,000 people. New York, although growing rapidly, had just 7,000 residents (by 1800 it would have 60,000). In 1760, colonists numbered 1.5 million—six times the population at the turn of the century.

This expansion of colonies and people meant that the influence of Puritanism was waning. Many of the newer colonies were founded on non-Puritan beliefs.

In 1682 Charles II granted wealthy English Quaker William Penn a large tract of land west of what is now New Jersey. Penn named it Sylvania for its densely wooded terrain, and then renamed it Pennsylvania after his father. (Like many of the colonies, Pennsylvania was a commercial venture that was intended to turn a profit for its investors, in this case through the trading of furs and lumber.)

Penn's charter for the new colony reflected his progressive Quaker views. There was freedom of religion for all who believed in God, and a constitution that called for two "houses" of government and that allowed, in the spirit of a Quaker meeting, "open discourse." Most important, Penn treated the native peoples of the area—primarily the Lenni Lenape, called the Delaware tribe by the Anglo settlers—with respect, buying land from them rather than attacking and taking it. Pennsylvania grew quickly as Quakers from all over Europe settled there, joined by Catholics, Amish, Mennonites, and Jews. Penn designed Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love, denoting many faiths—between 1682 and 1684. Within fifty years it was the second largest urban area in the colonies. Progressive Quaker views on religious freedom and abolition—and later, sexual freedom—would be a strong influence on American political thought.

This rapid growth and diversity meant that the social and religious cohesiveness of the early colonies was lost; the Puritans' strict social demands on the individual were waning and being questioned. The infamous Salem witch trials of 1692 and 1693, in which twenty people were executed and five more died in prison, were a grim manifestation of the excesses of the Puritan imagination. However, the Massachusetts General Court issued a public apology for the trials five years later and eventually granted monetary compensation to the families of those executed. The 1682 Pennsylvania sodomy law did away with the death penalty for sodomy and replaced it with a whipping, six months of hard labor, and the forfeiture of a third of the accused's estate. (Thirty-two years later Pennsylvania made sodomy a capital crime again, reflecting changing demographics and belief systems.)

The growing assemblage of people, social structures, and political entities fostered a sense of pluralism unique to the colonies. But this pluralism did not reconcile the tension between the freedom of the individual and the need for a strong state formally embodied by the personal moral rectitude of the Puritans.

SLAVES AND CITIZENS

Despite the progressive inclination of some colonies, the persecuting society persisted. Colonists continued their sexualized treatment of native people, sodomy laws proliferated, and the legal, economic, and cultural institution of slavery was introduced into the colonies. It is impossible to understand American history—including the position of LGBT people—without acknowledging the overwhelming, debilitating effect that slavery has had on this country. From the mid-seventeenth century, organized, profit-driven slavery influenced all aspects of American life. Slavery struck at the heart of the ideals of individualism, personal liberty, and equality that were present, in sophisticated and rudimentary forms, at the birth of the colonies. Slavery was integral to how the colonies, and later the Republic, continued to reconceptualize individual freedom, race, property, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, over 650,000 Africans were brought to North America as slaves. However, this is a relatively small number compared to the twelve million Africans who were transported and sold, mostly in the Caribbean and South America, in the mid-Atlantic slave trade, also referred to as the first Middle Passage.

Slavery arose in the colonies hand in hand with both European and African indentured servitude, which was commonplace. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more than half of all white European (mostly British) immigrants to the colonies were indentured servants. These were often rural people who, dispossessed of their land and unemployed, were living in poverty in English cities. Their indenture, a contractual agreement with the person or firm who brought them to the colonies, lasted five years, after which they were free.

In the mid to late seventeenth century, laws in the colonies began to change. In 1654 a Virginia court declared that John Casor, an African servant, was legally a slave for life. Gradually, African indentured servants became legally treated as slaves, with no possibility of ending their servitude. This shift occurred for a number

of complex reasons, the most pertinent of which is that Africans, in contrast to indentured whites, had no outside social and cultural support systems of other Africans in the country and thus were more easily enslaved.

Contemporary European societies had not promoted or regulated persecution on this large a scale. By 1860, the slave population in the United States had grown to four million, a third of the population in the fifteen (out of thirty-three) states that sanctioned slavery. In some states slaves were in the majority. In 1720, just under 70 percent of South Carolina's population was enslaved.

Slavery was also tied to religious belief.² Virginia ruled in 1682 that

all servants . . . which shall be imported into this country either by sea or by land, whether Negroes, Moors, mulattoes or Indians who and whose parentage and native countries are not Christian at the time of their first purchase by some Christian . . . and all Indians, which shall be sold by our neighboring Indians, or any other trafficking with us for slaves, are hereby adjudged, deemed and taken to be slaves to all intents and purposes any law, usage, or custom to the contrary notwithstanding.¹

Lawmakers in the colonies were constructing a separate class of nonwhite, non-Christian people to be an economic bulwark of free labor. They had several reasons: a growing landowning class that did not want the competition of a new class of freed indentured servants; a shift, mostly in southern states, to agricultural products such as tobacco and cotton that were labor intensive; and a massive westward expansion of colonies that needed labor.

Except for Quakers, most colonists did not consider slavery contradictory to Christian theology. Its proponents justified the practice by citing verses in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels, including Genesis 9:25–27, in which Noah's grandson Canaan is condemned to slavery: "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers." The biblical justifications for slavery, not unlike the

biblical justifications for the condemnation of same-sex sexual activity, were used to both enforce draconian laws and justify extraordinarily harsh punishments.

Because slaves were deemed to be "property," slaveholders had unlimited legal power over them, including the right to sell them for profit and separate them from their loved ones. Thus slaves were denied the basic right of maintaining relationships with their biological and chosen families. Slave owning was not simply a matter of personal property, but was woven into the social fabric of the Republic. For example, laws held slave owners accountable for not punishing runaway slaves, since such behavior was seen as a threat to public safety.

It would be inaccurate and unwise to make strict parallel claims for the oppression of slaves and gay people. But the extensive legal and social effects of slavery have shaped the social and political context of America today. The acceptance of slavery as a philosophical concept and political reality laid the groundwork for the justification of "othering"—designating a group of people as "different," placing them outside of the legal, social, and moral framework granting full citizenship. As was the case for both native people and religious dissenters, othering is the enactment of Moore's persecuting society and Douglas's sequestering of the impure from the pure. The template of othering in slavery has two main effects that apply to LGBT people and other minorities.

First, slavery constructed a legal system that mandated noncitizenship for slaves (which, after slavery was abolished, evolved into second-class citizenship for African Americans). This denial of citizenship, however, did not release slaves from the obligation of obeying the law, which was often enforced more harshly on them than on full citizens. While racialized slavery—abolished by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865—is clearly the extreme example of noncitizenship, its hierarchical legacies are applied to other marginalized groups throughout U.S. history.

Second, the widespread acceptance of legalized slavery reinforced and normalized mainstream society's ideas about moral and sexual inferiority. Just as early Spanish settlers accused native peoples of

a natural inferiority and intrinsic sexual immorality, white colonists, even if they were not slaveholders, presumed that Africans were less than human and incapable of moral Christian behavior. To the Europeans, native people and Africans who looked and behaved differently from them were dangerous to the accepted morality of the dominant culture, and therefore they were treated with varying degrees of moral and social scorn.

Accusations of sexual immorality often took two forms. The first was the charge of dangerous hypersexuality. In the second—and counterintuitive—form, the sexual outcast becomes the object of repressed sexual fantasies of the mainstream culture. This was certainly the case in America, in which dominant culture's sexual fantasies were projected onto the sexuality of the enslaved Africans. These myths included prodigious sexual desire in African women and men and, in the post-Civil War years, the idea that all African men were capable of sexual violence and rape. These projections were used by the dominant group as reasons to maintain their position of physical and social power. A primary reason, for instance, why slave owners depicted enslaved women as hypersexual was to justify their right to rape these women. This presumed hypersexuality was the excuse for white men to be sexual with enslaved women and the reason they needed to be controlled.

The articulation of these sexual fantasies raised enormous anxiety in the dominant culture, thus making the minority group the target of more physical violence. Under slavery, this violence manifested itself in a pervasive culture of sexual humiliation, sexual harassment, and rape, all used to control and subjugate Africans. Projected sexual fantasies tell us nothing about the Africans or their descendants, but a great deal about the women and men who held them. By othering, European colonists began constructing a new national identity and citizenship premised on a massive displacement of their own sexual and gender anxieties onto marginalized groups.

This mixture of erotic fascination and anxiety is embedded in the numerous Indian captivity narratives, such as the best-selling 1682 memoir *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary*

Rowlandson, that were hugely popular from the late seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. These works—usually about European women captured by, then forced to live with (and often marry) native people—excited and titillated European readers, as the “innocence” of “white women” was threatened by the ravenous and dangerous sexuality of nonwhite men. (William Bradford saw a similar threat at Merrymount with the intermarriage of white men and Native American women.)

This othering of Native Americans was a major way that colonists conceptualized sexuality and same-sex relationships. In a complex mixture of displaced sexual idealization and fear, Native American characters appear as eroticized demons and ghosts in European American literature from the mid-seventeenth century on. In the popular colonial and European American imagination, these Native American characters embodied the overt sexuality and “natural” desire that the Europeans lacked or repressed. These fantasies of native people were, in essence, a critique of what was considered by majority culture to be normative sexual desire and behavior. This idea of nonwhite people possessing a “natural” or uninhibited sexuality—recalling, in a more positive way, how the early Spanish conquistadors saw native people—is inherently racist. Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century it had evolved to become foundational to how America culture was to conceptualize male-male relationships.²

Ideas about the “natural” and the “civilized” are often at the heart of how a culture classifies people, groups, and actions. Sexual activity between people of the same sex is often described as “unnatural” in religious and legal discourse—it is contrary to what “nature” or “natural law” intended. This is why sodomy statutes often refer to “unnatural acts.” European and colonial society considered itself “civilized” when contrasted with nonwhite peoples. Yet the othering of a behavior or identity as dangerous may, under certain ambiguous conditions, make it more desired. In this way, the “unnatural” became “natural” only when enacted by an already “civilized” white person. This is an example of purity and danger congealing around sexuality and gender.

FROM PURITANISM TO ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT

We now refer to the extraordinarily radical political, cultural, and scientific ideas of the eighteenth century, collectively referred to—using a phase coined in the mid-nineteenth century—as the Enlightenment. In Europe, the Enlightenment drastically transformed intellectual life, majority consciousness, and social structures. Its effect on the colonies was profound, since it led directly to the American Revolution and the establishment of the Republic with the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776.

At heart, the Enlightenment was a rejection of the age of faith—belief and acceptance of ideas and concepts without evidence. The Enlightenment grew out of the new scientific methods of thinkers such as Isaac Newton, who “proved” the existence of gravity in his 1684 *On the Motion of Bodies in an Orbit*, and René Descartes, who in his 1637 *Discourse on the Method* helped invent rationalism, a philosophical system that prioritized logic to arrive at its conclusions. One of the most important claims of the Enlightenment was the insistence that every human being had equal worth, dignity, and personal integrity. However, many of the Enlightenment thinkers who formulated these radical ideas did not apply them to everyone, harboring prejudice against nonwhites, Jews, and women even as they argued for equality. Some even constructed “scientific” evidence to rationally prove a biological inequality.

Some colonialists embraced one of the most radical ideals of the Enlightenment: John Locke’s concept of the separation of church and state. For millennia, religious and political structures had been inextricably bound together. The Papacy forced kings and emperors to enact Catholic policy; monarchies were predicated on the divine right of kings; civil legal systems were based largely on canon law. That is why sodomy—in Catholic and Protestant theology, a sin—was written into civil law. The First Amendment’s religion clauses—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”—marked a critical and significant turning point in how the United States would be governed. Certainly the thinking of colonialists such as Thomas

Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams was enormously influenced by Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Almost all of the men who wrote the foundational documents of the new American political system were deists—they believed in a supreme being but not necessarily in organized religion, and they rejected the belief that the scriptures were divinely inspired. They envisioned the laws of United States to be, in true Enlightenment tradition, based on reason and equality.

There was one aspect of continental thought that had no impact on how the founders viewed sexuality. By the mid-1780s many European countries were enacting penal reform to recodify confusing and repetitive statutes and bring laws more in line with contemporary thinking. Sodomy laws were in direct conflict with principles of the Enlightenment that called for personal sexual autonomy. But despite a clearly articulated separation of church and state, the colonies never abolished their sodomy laws.

This was not true in France, which abolished its sodomy law using Enlightenment precepts. In 1789—more than a decade after the American Declaration of Independence—the French National Assembly produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man, boldly stating that true civil liberty included the right “to do anything that does not injure others.”³ By 1791 this progressive thinking reached its logical conclusion when the Constituent Assembly abolished punishments for crimes “created by superstition, feudalism, the tax system, and despotism.” These included blasphemy, heresy, witchcraft, and sodomy, all crimes that were distinctly related to the persecuting society throughout European history. The only crimes connected with sex punished under the new French legal code were rape, child prostitution, and the selling of obscene pictures. This extraordinary legal reform had wide-ranging effects when, in 1810, it was incorporated into the Napoleonic Code. As a result, it was implemented in all French colonies and wherever Napoleon established governments in Europe and the Americas.

In the context of the European Enlightenment, such a reform makes sense. Writers such as Denis Diderot, Jean-Paul Marat, Montesquieu, and Voltaire had written about the need to decriminalize

personal sexual behavior (which they saw as an ethical decision, not a criminal one), even if they personally thought sodomy was wrong or unnatural. (Voltaire's famous quip about his own forays into male-male sexual activity displays Enlightenment ambivalence: "Once, a scientist; twice, a sodomite.")

Why did the American revolutionaries not follow France's example? Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson attended dinner parties in Paris with some of these philosophers. The notion of sexual autonomy even rearticulated, for Enlightenment thinkers, the Puritan concept of individuality and care of the self and body. Yet not only did the thirteen original colonies keep their sodomy laws, they maintained, elaborated on, and enforced them for the next 212 years. Was it that the United States, composed of colonies rooted in many conflicting religious and civil polities, would be unable to agree on a nonambivalent way to conceptualize sexual behavior? Or was it that a country premised on dissent from England had to continue to assert its identity as such?

A crucial response to this question—which is central to thinking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people—is that during the Revolutionary era, American culture was undergoing significant and complicated transformations regarding gender. Gender was understood by the majority of Americans as a stable system that had its roots in Genesis 5:2: "Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam." Gender is a primary organizational focus in any culture. In the newly formed United States—predicated on revolutionary ideas, yet deeply flawed in the execution of them—concepts of gender would undergo major changes that evidenced this ambivalence. The presentation of a firm, masculine authority as the face of the new American citizen exposed the tension of wanting to be free and needing to assert control.

INVENTING THE AMERICAN MAN

One of the most important changes of the Revolutionary era was the invention of a new form of American masculinity. As the colonies claimed their political independence from Great Britain, it

was clear they would have to establish a new, distinct culture that would reflect their own political ideology. One of the ways they did this was to consciously invent a new "American man" who represented all of the new virtues of the Republic and had little connection to the traditional Englishman. This new American man was bold, rugged, aggressive, unafraid of fighting, and comfortable asserting himself. This model was in complete contrast to the Englishman, who was stereotyped as refined, overly polite, ineffectual, and often effeminate. The new American man was personified in popular myth-making by rural colonists such as Ethan Allen, who fought the British in Vermont and New York State, and John Paul Jones, the Scottish-born naval mastermind who famously said in battle, "I have not yet begun to fight."

This new action-oriented American man already existed in some form, due to the conditions of survival on the frontier. The Revolution was well fought by the colonists because they were an armed society and "just about every white man had a gun and could shoot."⁴ The new American man, a mythic prototype defined by his heroic actions in the colonial militia, was also a prototype of the citizen. Not only were slaves unable to join a militia, but so were friendly native Americans, free Africans, white servants, and white men without homes. These restrictions ensured that the prototypical American man was of a certain class, ethnicity, property, and citizenship status.

A prime example of this fabrication of American manhood is Royall Tyler's 1787 *The Contrast*, the first American-written play produced in the United States. A traditional comedy of manners, the play pitted the foolish, duplicitous, American-born but British-identified Mr. Billy Dimple—a "flippant, pallid, polite beau, who devotes the morning to his toilet . . . and then minces out"—against the play's hero, the very American Colonel Manly, who is all that his names implies. *The Contrast* is insistently didactic and aimed at creating a new American citizen-based culture. The play's prologue states its political purpose: "Exult, each patriot heart!—this night is shewn / A piece, which we may fairly call our own; / Where the proud titles of 'My Lord! Your Grace!' / To humble Mr. and plain Sir give place."

At the play's end, as he is called a coward for refusing to fight with Dimple, Manly explains:

Yes, Sir. This sword was presented to me by that brave Gallic hero, the Marquis De la Fayette. I have drawn it in the service of my country, and in private life, on the only occasion where a man is justified in drawing his sword, in defence of a lady's honour. I have fought too many battles in the service of my country to dread the imputation of cowardice. Death from a man of honour would be a glory you do not merit; you shall live to bear the insult of man and the contempt of that sex whose general smiles afforded you all your happiness.⁵

In one grand speech, Tyler connects the colonial revolution to American manhood, national pride, personal honor, and different-sex desire.

This is, in part, why the United States did not abolish its sodomy laws. Highly gendered societies reinforce traditional ideas about gender through regulating sexual behavior. In the fervor of those revolutionary years and the promotion of a national masculinity, the idea that sodomy laws might be abolished might have been understood, even by Enlightenment men, as counterproductive.

But the creation of a prototype American man presented a host of broader questions and problems. If there was a new American man, did there also have to be a new American woman? Would she be as bold and adventurous as her male counterpart? There is no question that colonial and Revolution-era women worked hard and exhibited enormous physical and psychological strengths; they often ran homes and businesses when men were off fighting. Life was filled with everyday hardships as the country grew and the Revolutionary War continued for eight years. Yet in the traditional Puritan equation of different-sex relationships in a family, a man's strength was defined, enhanced, and complemented by a compliant woman. At this point the myth of the new American man—and the nation's new gender roles—become less coherent. Like all strictly delineated systems of gender, the new American models could not represent the diverse lives of actual people.

The evolving American culture was filled with enormous anxiety over the meaning of gender roles. First, many of the men who conceptualized this new country were not good examples of the new American man. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton, with their fine manners, powdered wigs, large estates, and voluminous libraries, were far closer to the image of the wealthy, aristocratic, educated Englishman from which the country was distancing itself. Second, the women in this circle were also well educated and frequently spoke their minds, contrary to the subordinate role women were thought to hold in society. During the 1776 Continental Congress, Adams and his wife, Abigail, wrote one another frequently, and she was direct in her concerns:

I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. . . . If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend.⁶

John Adams dismisses her concerns with a joke: "We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obliged to go fair and softly, and, in practice, you know we are the subjects. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat . . ." But it is clear that the new American nation and the new American man valued free white men above women and all other men.⁷

Abigail Adams was not the only woman with these ideas. Over the next decade, women lobbied for suffrage, only to be consistently denied the right to have a voice in their government. While

some states allowed female suffrage for a short while, this quickly changed. Women were denied suffrage in New York in 1777, in Massachusetts in 1780, and in New Hampshire in 1784. In 1787 a constitutional convention allowed the states to decide on suffrage; all states but New Jersey denied women the right to vote. New Jersey revoked female suffrage in 1807. In 1867 the Fourteenth Amendment stipulated specifically that suffrage is the right of male citizens alone.

JUST FRIENDS

In societies in which gender and power are inexplicably intertwined, often little respect is given to people who desire their own sex or who do not conform to accepted gender expectations. Same-sex relationships and desires, however, manifest themselves in various, often more socially acceptable, ways. This is especially true in the complicated interplay between companionship, community, and eroticism in people's lives. The clearly defined separate social spheres for women and men—both the public and the private for men, and most often the domestic for women—give rise to clearly defined same-sex cultures, usually referred to as “homosocial.” This term does not necessarily imply an erotic or sexual component—although those could, and often do, exist—but rather describes a social construct that emerged in specific ways during the eighteenth century.

Homosocial space at this time gave birth to distinct same-sex relationships that were referred to in popular and literary culture as romantic or intimate friendships. These friendships were important to the women and men who engaged in them—often as important and long-lasting as traditional heterosexual marriages—and were an accepted, praised, and significant social institution. Alan Bray argues that these friendships were largely a product of the Enlightenment—that the ideas of egalitarianism, brotherhood, and rational love (as opposed to uncontrolled, passionate love) helped contribute to a new concept of deeply committed, emotionally passionate friendship between members of the same sex.⁸ It is possible that some of these friendships embodied similarities to our contem-

porary ideas of romantic and sexual relationships. In many ways they were understood as a beneficial and complementary alternative to marriage. A major function of heterosexual marriage was to regulate sexual activity that would lead to reproduction, but this new idea of friendship, for men as well as women, often provided a more enlightening, expressive outlet.

We can easily find evidence of “romantic friendships” in the lives of both famous and common people. Feminist historians have uncovered extensive, complex networks of female friendships in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and examined what they meant, not only to the individual women but to the society in which they lived.

Personal allegiance could be political allegiance, but not necessarily national allegiance. Women involved in these friendships understood the social significance and resonance, which sometimes challenged social norms, of their deep and intense connections. Sarah M. Grimke, the abolitionist and feminist, signed her letters to her beloved Mary Parker “thine in the bonds of womanhood.” Grimke—understanding the implications of “bonds” in slavery—used the phrase to signify the deep connection between herself and Parker and how they were bound together as women, as well as oppressed together as women.

The writers' language also situates them in the realm of the erotic. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Eunice Callender of Boston wrote to her cousin and intimate friend Sarah Ripley (whose letters, she wrote, “breathe forth the sentiments of my soul”): “Oh could you see with what rapture . . . all your epistles are open'd by me . . . then would you acknowledge that *my* Friendship at least equals your own, and yours I believe is as true as pure a flame as ever warmed the breast of any human Creature.”⁹

This language was common within male romantic friendships as well. Daniel Webster wrote to James Hervey Bingham in an 1804 letter: “Yes, James, I must come; we will yoke together again; your little bed is just wide enough; we will practice at the same bar, and be as friendly a pair of single fellows as ever cracked a nut.”¹⁰ Such intensity and devotion were emblematic of how these relationships reflected the newly professed equality and fraternity of society and

the nation. The Marquis de Lafayette wrote affectionately to George Washington on June 12, 1799, during the height of the Revolution:

My Dear General . . . There never was a friend, my dear general, so much, so tenderly beloved, as I love and respect you: happy in our union, in the pleasure of living near to you, in the pleasing satisfaction of partaking every sentiment of your heart, every event of your life, I have taken such a habit of being inseparable from you, that I cannot now accustom myself to your absence, and I am more and more afflicted at that enormous distance which keeps me so far from my dearest friend.¹¹

Because of their intensity, intimate friendships could be as complicated as any sexual relationship, and not always smooth, as we see in this letter from LaFayette to Washington, written a few months after the previous one:

My dear general—From those happy ties of friendship by which you were pleased to unite yourself with me, from the promises you so tenderly made me when we parted at Fishkill, gave me such expectations of hearing often from you, that complaints ought to be permitted to my affectionate heart. Not a line from you, my dear general, has yet arrived into my hands, and though several ships from America, several despatches from congress or the French minister, are safely brought to France, my ardent hopes of getting at length a letter from General Washington have ever been unhappily disappointed: I cannot in any way account for that bad luck, and when I remember that in those little separations where I was but some days from you, the most friendly letters, the most minute account of your circumstances, were kindly written to me, I am convinced you have not neglected and almost forgotten me for so long a time. I have, therefore, to complain of fortune, of some mistake or neglect in acquainting you that there was an opportunity, of anything; indeed, but what could injure the sense I have of your affection for me. Let me beseech

you, my dear general, by that mutual, tender, and experienced friendship in which, I have put an immense portion of my happiness, to be very exact in inquiring for occasions, and never to miss those which may convey to me letters that I shall be so much pleased to receive.¹²

Lafayette's second letter to Washington can be read a communication from a hurt, angry lover. We have no conclusive evidence that George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette were sexually involved as lovers—nor, as historian Charley Shively points out, do we have any evidence that they were not—but what we do know is that the two men had an intensely emotional, companionate friendship with erotic overtones. Their relationship can only be understood in the context of a national fight for freedom from political oppression and the ideals of the Enlightenment. Passionate same-sex friendships were often public and acknowledged by the culture in which they thrived. As public relationships, they influenced and were influenced by the political culture of the time.¹³

REVOLUTIONARY GENDER

In 1778 an anonymous contributor to the *Worcester Spy* wrote that the newly formed American people had “broken the line that divided the sexes.”¹⁴ At the end of the eighteenth century, three very different people—two real and one fictional, all of them born women—captured the public imagination for breaking that divide.

The first was Jemima Wilkinson, a charismatic evangelist who was born a Quaker in 1752. In 1775, during a series of debilitating illnesses and fevers, she believed that Christ entered her body and that she was now neither female nor male, but was commanded to bring her ministry to the new country. She renamed herself “Publick Universal Friend,” refused to use the pronouns “she” or “he,” and dressed in gender-neutral clerical garments that made her sex unreadable (although contemporary accounts state that many in her audience saw her as male). Wilkinson's gender presentation, as well as her theological message—she preached complete sexual ab-

stinence, strict adherence to a narrowly defined interpretation of the Ten Commandments, unqualified universal friendship, and the apocalyptic vision of the harshest Hebrew Bible prophets—made her a sensation throughout Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. In the mid-1780s the popular press and pamphlet culture covered her sermons in detail and placed particular emphasis on her sexually ambiguous persona. She had a huge following that verged on a cult and eventually started her own religious settlement in central New York State.

Deborah Sampson Gannett's public career was as noted as Wilkinson's. She was born in 1760 outside Plymouth, Massachusetts. In May 1782, dressed as a man, she enrolled in the Continental Army under the name Robert Shurtliff. She fought in several battles until she was discovered, after being wounded in 1783, to be a woman. She received an honorable discharge and in 1785 married Robert Gannett. In a few years' time they had three children. Sampson Gannett was relatively unknown until 1797 when, in conjunction with the writer Herman Mann, she published a semifictional narrative of her time as a cross-dressed Revolutionary soldier. It was titled *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady, Whose Life and Character Are Peculiarly Distinguished—Being a Continental Soldier, for Nearly Three Years, in the Late American War*. The work was a straightforward tale that touched on the author's possible homosexuality through descriptions of titillating, affectionate interactions with women. Sampson Gannett's intention in publishing the narrative was to gain public attention for her attempt to be awarded a military pension.

In 1802 Sampson Gannett commenced a series of public lectures about her life. She spent much of her time on stage—after stating that she could not explain why she chose to cross-dress and join the Continental army—extolling traditional gender roles for women. Near the end of the presentation, she left the stage, returned dressed in her army uniform, and executed complicated and physically taxing military drills. Her presentation was extremely popular in Boston, and she repeated it in other New England cities. In 1816, after years of petitioning and with help from Paul Revere, Sampson Gan-

nett was finally awarded the full pensions she deserved by both the state of Massachusetts and Congress.

The Female Review and Sampson Gannett's public performance were popular because her dual public image as a brave soldier and a traditional woman tantalized the post-Revolutionary audience. By consciously refusing to be cast firmly in either gender role, Sampson Gannett insisted that she would be both and neither at the same time.

This transgressive approach to gender identity was also present in an 1815 work of fiction titled *The Female Marine, or the Adventures of Miss Lucy Brewer*. Most probably written by Nathaniel Hill Wright, an obscure Boston literary figure, it is a breathless, first-person narrative that frequently references Sampson Gannett's life. *The Female Marine* tells the story of a young woman who is seduced, impregnated, loses her child, and then is forced to work in a Boston brothel. She escapes and, dressed as a man, spends three years on the USS *Constitution* as a sailor. After many adventures, including potential romantic entanglements with women, she marries well.¹⁵

The Female Marine was so popular that it brought forth five sequels, testifying to the enormous reader interest in cross-dressing literature. These sequels included a self-defense from the madam of the brothel in which Lucy had been sequestered and a new story of male impersonation by a character named Almira Paul.

The public interest in the topic of female transvestism was not isolated to stories about these three strikingly different women. Late eighteenth-century American literary and popular culture was obsessed with this new notion of the cross-dressed female warrior.¹⁶ Novels such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond, or The Secret Witness*; the memoir of famous cross-dressing British sailor Hannah Snell, a popular version of which was published in *Thomas's New-England Almanack*; several plays based on the life of Joan of Arc; numerous broadsides of popular ballads detailing the exploits of cross-dressing female soldiers and sailors—all were extraordinarily popular with audiences.

These sermons, books, lectures, pamphlets, novels, plays, and ballads struck a chord with the new American audience. Female and male readers saw themselves at the center of a whirligig, a

quickly evolving culture that was breaking from the old world but not yet settled in the new. Howard Zinn points out that “between the American Revolution and the Civil War, so many elements of American society were changing—the growth of population, the movement westward, the development of the factory system, expansion of political rights for white men, education growth to match the economic need—that changes were bound to take place in the situation of women.”¹⁷ Certainly the examples of Wilkinson, Sampson Gannett, and the fictional Lucy Brewer all point to new, if not explicitly articulated, freedoms that were opening for women in a country that was expanding on an almost daily basis. But they also are an indication of new ways of looking at gender.

In highly public ways, these three women opened a liminal space in which new ideas and constructs of gender and sexual behavior could be discussed. In news reports and public presentations, both Wilkinson and Sampson Gannett were mythologized—even fictionalized as much as Lucy Brewer. Historian Susan Juster claims that Wilkinson is best understood as a “spiritual transvestite.”¹⁸ She makes the point that Wilkinson took seriously Paul’s claim in Galatians 3:28 that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In this sense, Wilkinson’s “transvestism” is indeed spiritual. But it is also gendered. It can easily be understood as a purely American phenomenon that blurs the line between male and female while at the same time creating the perfect U.S. citizen—literally the Publick Universal Friend—who is both religious and secular. This image supports and yet contradicts the Revolution’s new gender roles, as well as the concept of separation of church and state central to the Constitution. To be neither male nor female, to experiment with coded representations of lesbianism, to banish—as Wilkinson did—traditional pronouns was a radical embrace of new articulations of public sexuality and understanding of gender.

Can we call Jemima Wilkinson, Deborah Sampson Gannett, or Lucy Brewer transgender or transvestite? Not by the standards and the vocabulary of their time. These women, however, helped set the groundwork for a national culture that was open to experimentation in gender and sexual identity. The connecting line moves backward

as well as forward. It applies to the Enlightenment-influenced passionate friendships and the nationalized gender roles for women and men of the Revolution. Some of these new manifestations of gender behavior offered alternatives to social expectations, but they can also be seen as the building blocks to a more concise dichotomy between the public and private as a form of gender regulation.

The reality of the persecuting society never completely vanishes from U.S. history. It becomes increasingly refined. In the colonies, social and political persecution of certain groups was relatively indiscriminate, making few distinctions among individuals within a minority group. Gradually, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, we see a growing cultural schism occurring between the private and the public, which was largely the reason people were able to explore nontraditional gender roles. It was permissible for women and men to have passionate private friendships, which may have included an erotic or sexual component, as long as they conformed to accepted gender norms in public. It was acceptable for women such as Sampson Gannett to transgress gender norms in public as long as they adhered to traditional norms in their personal relationships.

This increasing split in public spheres and private spheres was a major shift in how sexual behavior and gender—and also citizenship—were conceptualized. Full citizenship was, and to a large degree still is, predicated on keeping unacceptable behavior private. This complicated relationship between the public and private is at the heart of LGBT history and life today.