

Book Review | The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America, by Greta LaFleur (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018)

Ingrid Diran
University of Michigan
idiran@umich.edu

Fundamentally reimagining each of the terms of its title, Greta LaFleur's *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* offers an alternative archive and conceptual infrastructure that will prove groundbreaking for historians of sexuality, race, and settler colonialism alike. Arguing that proto-racial conceptions of "human difference" were predicated upon a natural-historical or "environmental" lexicon of sexuality, this book occasions a fresh conversation among the three fields that promises to revitalize and reimagine each. It also offers a provocation to rethink the history of sexuality in light of what LaFleur calls the "environmental body" of the early modern period. This body is one whose governance both precedes and informs the biopolitical body of modernity but, unlike the latter, is understood neither as self-contained nor as self-expressive. Rather, the environmental body is organized by and in a field of susceptibility, operating at a remove from the interiority of a private individual. As such, the environmental body is governable by means other than subjectivity.

Without celebrating this body (which, after all, remains imbricated in the history of racial and settler colonial violence), LaFleur offers its "alternative genealogy, one that began in a world without the modern subject and quietly entered into modernity alongside it" (p. 205). This genealogy not only includes the history of sexuality without and before sexology; it also disrupts sexuality's conflation with

Diran, I. (2020). Review of *The natural history of sexuality in early America*, by Greta LaFleur (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 6(1), page 1-5.
<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

© Ingrid Diran, 2020 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

interiority. Indeed, this book's "powerful refusal of the total reorganization of the sexual into the subjective" (p. 31) bears implications that we are likely to ponder and unfurl for years to come. For what, indeed, is the history of sexuality *without a subject*?

LaFleur's answer: a history of racialization. Her introduction sets the stage for what will be the book's animating concern: namely, how environmental ideas of racial and sexual diversity fundamentally shaped, reflected, and constituted one another in early modern North America. Sex and race are codetermined through the logic of natural history, a taxonomic epistemology of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Emblematized by Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, natural history modeled knowledge on the speciation of plants, classing all organisms, including humans, according to their modes of reproduction. In this way, natural history turns sexual behavior into a fundamental principle of differentiation among forms of life and, in the case of humans, turns sexuality into "something of a racial symptom" (p. 6). The importance of this logic cannot be overstated, since, as LaFleur asserts, the "early modern rhetorical strategy of describing ethnic or cultural variety" operates "through the idiom of sexual aberrance" (p. 4).

Exploring the "sexual politics of racialization" (p. 25), LaFleur's first chapter shows how stories about the etiology of race came to double as theories of sexual variety. In addition to broadly reviewing the climatic, humoral, and stadial theories of human development in whose terms such narratives were promulgated, she also reads prominent natural historians (from Comte de Buffon to Adam Ferguson), concluding with an account of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* in which we see a "promiscuous[]" sampling of natural-historical arguments to justify subjugation of Native Americans and African slaves (p. 56). Here, too, LaFleur shows how an environmental idea of race allows sex to be thought as contextual, and hence, without provenance in any subject. In the eighteenth century, "sex—acts, desires, dispositions—was not entirely or even mostly theorized in privileged relation to the individual," but, on the contrary, "theorizing sexual behaviors as driven...by environmental factors...demands a new set of definitions for sex and sexuality tout court" (p. 60). This set of definitions is racial—though race, too, is understood not as phenotypical but ambient, less corporeal than climatic.

As a function of environment, race is thought to *reflect* itself in sexual practices. For example, in the Barbary captivity narratives that LaFleur discusses in her second chapter, the "sodomitical" (an environmental term irreducible to any one sex act) serves as a preeminent sign of both racial and religious difference. In

these narratives, which detail the enslavement of Christian sailors by Barbary pirates and appear from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, “both natural historians and religious leaders turned to the figure of sodomy to stage their concerns about ever-increasing contact with the Islamic world” (p. 68). Here, “orientalist theories about Islamic depravity, sensuality, and decadence were often themselves steeped in heliotropic or otherwise climate-based theories of human difference” (p. 69). To be sure, much comparative work should be done along the lines LaFleur lays out—for instance, by reading Barbary captivity narratives alongside two contemporary iterations of the genre: Native American captivity stories (for instance, Cotton Mather’s *The Captivity of Hannah Duston*) and slave narratives.

Such a comparison would link in crucial ways to Mather’s role in LaFleur’s reading of gallows literature in the subsequent chapter. This literature, she argues, imagines a different form of bondage: *habit*. An “articulating figure, binding contemporary understandings of racial difference and sexual aberrance together in emergent theories of the origin of vice” (p. 105), habit marks a node or “nexus of environmental influence and individual inclination” (p. 106), and evokes fundamental eighteenth-century questions about self-governance, and “who—or what—exerts sovereignty over individual bodies” (p. 106). As a case in point, LaFleur reads an execution sermon that Mather delivers concerning Joseph Hanno, a manumitted African slave who murdered his wife in 1721. Deeming Hanno an “Ethiopian in Wickedness,” Mather’s sermon tightly yokes race and sin through the idiom of habit. LaFleur argues that emerging discourses of criminal justice draw upon such narratives for a racialized lexicon of aberrant behavior. Bad habits—which gallows literature consistently links to sexual deviance, whether they involve sex acts or not—morally and racially *blacken* the accused, indexing an incapacity for self-governance (and hence, a justification for detention).

Further linking the discourses of race and sex to emerging conceptions of bio-governance, LaFleur’s fourth chapter, “Botanical Sexuality and the Colonial Landscape,” illuminates the sympathies between “the ‘sexual science’ of botany” and settler colonialism (p. 140). In a reading of Herman Mann’s *The Female Review* (a fictionalized biography of Deborah Sampson, a woman who lived as a man for over a year, joined the Continental Army, and murdered two Native Americans during the Revolutionary War), LaFleur argues that speculations about Sampson’s sexuality constitute a strategy for naturalizing the “new and emergent forms of state governance and control” (p. 162) she represents. In a striking analysis, LaFleur shows how Mann’s speculations into Sampson’s sexuality as *different* in some profound but as yet undefinable way enables him to describe her on the

order of a new, unknown species of plant. Precisely through the partial opacity of Sampson's sexuality, Mann is able to present her whiteness (and the settler colonial violence it exemplifies) as a specimen indigenous to the land of the British settler colonies but distinct from its *other* native populations.

If racial indigeneity can be achieved by sexuality, so too can space—as a habitat—be understood in racial terms. Thus, the *spatializing* of race is the subject of LaFleur's last chapter, which demonstrates how, in a shift linked to the "development of sexology as an arm of the human sciences specifically devoted to the study of sex as a discrete item of inquiry" (p. 165), racialized environments are imagined to foster and even cause sexual aberrance. LaFleur returns here to the issue of vice, asking how it is reconfigured in early nineteenth-century population science. If, at an earlier moment (for instance, in gallows literature), vice had been defined as a racialized trait expressed through sexual habit, it is now understood, scientifically, "as a social affliction that could compromise the economic and even literal health of an urban population" (p. 165). Consulting early nineteenth-century studies and reform efforts aimed at sex workers in Boston's "Negro Hill," LaFleur shows how sexual vice was construed as a population-level effect of the Hill's blackness.

As LaFleur notes in her epilogue, these five chapters together contest the strict triangulation of sexuality, subjectivity, and the body that has become synonymous with biopolitics since the publication of Michel Foucault's influential histories of sexuality. Alongside Foucault's conception of productive disciplinary power, LaFleur situates the history of environmental sexuality, suggesting that "as modern notions of the hermetic, biopoliticized body, fighting off its environment rather than coexisting ecologically with it, rose to dominance, eighteenth-century genealogies of the environmental body became *harder to see*" (p. 190, my emphasis). Having taught us *how to see* these genealogies, *The Natural History of Sexuality* implies two related and profound reappraisals of the history of sexuality as we know it. First, it reveals alternative genealogies of sexuality's governing concepts and frameworks, especially that of population science (which LaFleur shows is deeply rooted in natural-historical notions of race). Second, it helps to imagine sexuality otherwise, to "ask different questions about what it is, where it is, what it might mean, and how to better imagine its politics" (p. 191). Without romanticizing environmental sexuality, LaFleur concludes by citing its key discursive sites—natural history and population theory—as "two vocabularies for cataloging the long-eighteenth-century ways of understanding sex without or at a distance from the subject" (p. 198). At a time when queer politics has "been so effectively co-opted...against affinity, against

collectivity, and against justice" (p. 206), this alternative genealogy contains the potential, perhaps, of an environmental, embodied counter-politics. Such a potential is certainly elusive, given that, as LaFleur cautions, "most histories of sexuality are ugly—violent, unbidden, unusable" (p. 206). Just as quickly, though, she adds, "Let us start there" (p. 206). This book teaches us how to see where "there" is—where it has been, where it could lead, and the grave political cost of overlooking where we already are.

Author Bio

Ingrid Diran is an Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and Environmental Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her work engages intersections of environmental, biopolitical, Marxist, and critical race theories.