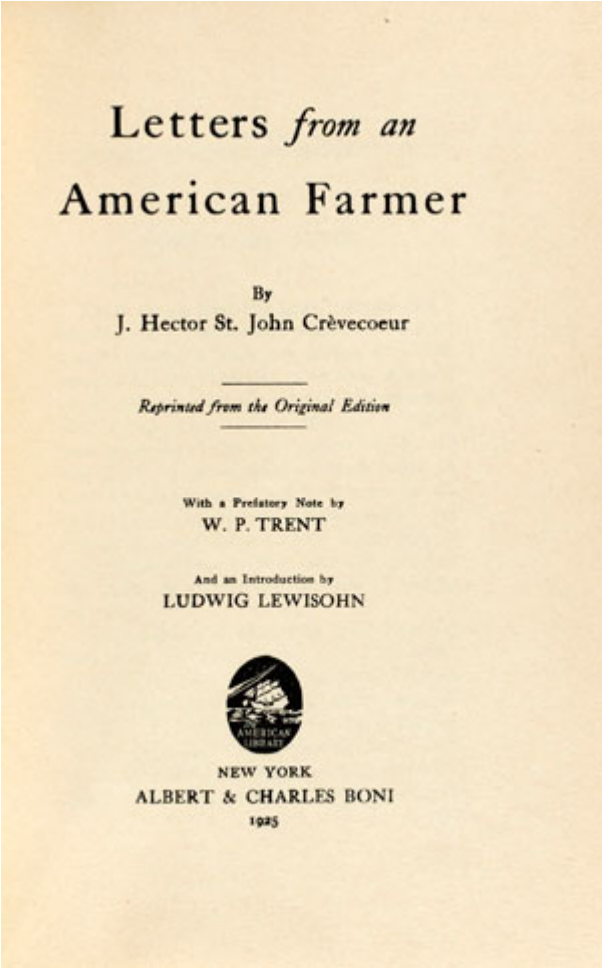
Intimate Atlantics: Toward a critical history of transnational early America



The desire for ever larger geographic scales as arbiters of historical truth should be apparent to anyone working in early American studies over the last two decades. The scholar working on a community, town, or city study is questioned on its relevance to the region. Those working on regions or towns are asked about their relevance to the nation. Those working on the nation find themselves fielding questions about the Atlantic, the hemispheric, or the transnational. Those working on the Atlantic, hemispheric, or transnational arenas are questioned on the scale of the global. Those working on the global … well, I guess the astronomical is next. To put it more pointedly, would moving forward to the universe be a return to the universal?

This caricature is a not entirely facetious response to historians' desire for increasingly larger geographic scales. This may be the time to ask: How does the turn to the Atlantic, the hemispheric, and the transnational, with a glimmer of the global to come, in early American studies work to create a linear history of monumental scale? What are we doing in our never-ending rush to the ever-receding proper scale of early American history?These are questions

worth asking, not least because our fascination with big, bigger, biggest has political consequences. If we take specific geographic scales as proper, as correctives to the distorted frames associated, most often, with the nation, we risk naturalizing contemporary political and capitalist relations. Specifically, when we treat the extranational as the proper scale and the nation as an artifice, as much recent work in both Atlantic and transnational early American studies tends to do, we assume that the sovereignty of the nation was waning in the eighteenth century, just like it is now. Seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century political, economic and social relations come to look peculiarly like the present. This kind of history writing makes the present normative; intentionally or not, it uses a picture of the past to secure contemporary relations of power as inevitable. Is there an alternative?In an especially lucid moment in one of the many interviews to which Michel Foucault was subjected throughout his career, he sketched his approach to what he called a "history of the present." "The question I start off with is: what are we and what are we today? What is this instant that is ours?" he explained. "What concerned me was to choose a field containing a number of points that are particularly fragile or sensitive at the present time … The game is to try to detect those things which have not been talked about, those things that, at the present time, introduce, show, *give some more or less vague indications of the fragility of our system of thought, in our way of reflecting, in our practices*" (italics added). This kind of history writing does not seek the origins of a contemporary problem. It does not, for example, start with the workings of today's global capitalism and look to the past for its origins. Instead, critical history thinks through how a contemporary organization of knowledge works in order to expose the fragility of a seemingly natural or culturally necessary order. A critical history of the transnational, the Atlantic, the hemispheric, or the global in early America would not simply trace the circulation of goods, track the migration of bodies through circuits of labor, and shore up the lineaments of complex trade networks in order to show how Early America was animated by fluid social and capital relations. It would not, in other words, intentionally or unintentionally, naturalize contemporary global capitalism. Instead, it would show that things and people have not always circulated this way; it would show that there is nothing proper or natural or culturally necessary about transnational circulation.

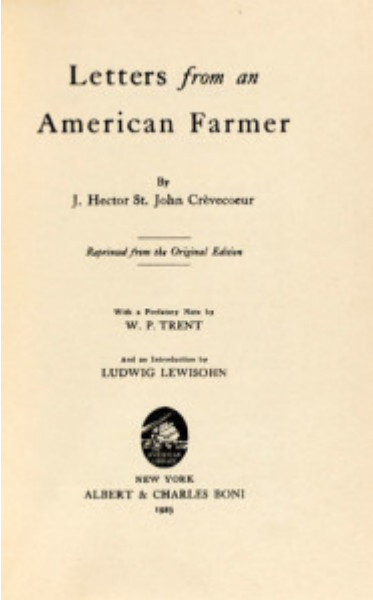


Fig. 1. Title page of Letters from an American Farmer …, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1793). Taken from a reprint of the original book, Albert & Charles, New York, 1925. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

One might begin to locate the difference between traditional and critical histories of extranational early America in some of the most prominent works in Atlantic history over the last decade. In his immensely influential taxonomy of Atlantic history, David Armitage writes of the fluidities, flows, and hybridities of the Atlantic, letting the oceanic metaphor do a great deal of his critical work. In defining the cis-Atlantic as "national or regional history within an Atlantic context," which, apart from the overall taxonomy, has been the signal contribution of his "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," Armitage notes that "[c]is-Atlantic history may overcome artificial, but nonetheless enduring, divisions between histories usually distinguished from each other as internal and external, domestic and foreign, or national and imperial." The problem here is not the critique of artificial categories like "internal" or "imperial" but the implicit claim that the cis-Atlantic is *not* artificial, that it is somehow the proper register of historical truth. I am not suggesting that we reject the "cis-Atlantic," which has proven to be a productive frame for engaging early American history. What we must do, rather, is pay careful attention to the ways in which such a spatial scale, when proffered as antidote to the artifices of the national and imperial, domestic and foreign, naturalizes contemporary spatial organization of global capitalism and secures relations of power as such.

If Armitage sought to liberate us from the artifices of the national and the imperial, external and internal, domestic and foreign (artifices which, it should be noted, are necessary insofar as they are part of the systems of knowledge of both early America and the Atlantic world, and impossible in that they never quite work the way in which they claim), Jack P. Greene, in an early, celebratory essay on Atlantic studies sought to liberate those of us

working in early American history from power altogether. “Historians who are committed to a larger Atlantic focus will never be able to rest,” Greene wrote, “until the nation-state paradigm, the final trace of the paradigm of power, is finally divested of its hold on the historical mind.” Here Greene identified power with the narrowly political life of the nation, and as such, claimed that the more powerful the nation, the more likely it was to have an expansive empire, and the more it mattered. This is a curiously narrow conceptualization of power, and it led Greene along a liberatory path that ends in the Atlantic world. A critique of the nation-state is of course necessary, but one would be hard-pressed to mark it as the last bastion of power. It makes more sense to consider how invocations of the Atlantic and other extra-national scales might simultaneously displace the nation and secure other relationships of power, especially those of present-day global capitalism.

If Armitage and Greene, two of the most influential advocates of Atlantic history, tend to naturalize contemporary relationships of power by casting scale beyond the nation (in this case, the Atlantic) as liberatory and authentic, they also naturalize their brand of history by invoking the ocean as a natural, geographic form. As Armitage puts it, “The attraction of Atlantic history lies, in part, in nature: after all, is not an ocean a natural fact? The Atlantic might seem to be one of the few historical categories that has an inbuilt geography, unlike the histories of nation-states with their shifting borders and imperfect overlaps between political allegiances and geographical boundaries.” But is there anything particularly natural about the Atlantic as it is used in contemporary historical practice? As a number of scholars have pointed out, the Atlantic in contemporary scholarship is hardly an organic whole. Instead, it has any number of internal fractures: the North Atlantic, the South Atlantic, the Black Atlantic, and the Anglo-, Franco-, Luso-, and Hispano-Atlantics, to name but a few. As these prefixes suggest, the Atlantic, as the extra-national scale par excellence of early American studies, remains a political category, despite repeated references to its naturalness.

One of the key figures of the Atlantic world is the hybrid, a product of the fluidity of ocean currents, of the constant movement and circulation that animated the Atlantic world. Perhaps the paradigmatic figure is the Atlantic creole who populates the early moments of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Ira Berlin’s account of Atlantic and North American slavery. The slave trading factories on the west coast of Africa were literally breeding grounds for hybridity. “European men took wives and mistresses (sometimes by arrangement) among the African women, and before long the children born of these unions helped populate the enclave,” he writes in *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Elmina, a major slave trading factory, “sprouted a substantial cadre of Euro-Africans…men and women of African birth but shared African and European parentage, whose swarthy skin, European dress and deportment, acquaintance with local norms, and multilingualism gave them an insider’s knowledge of both African and European ways but denied them full acceptance in either culture.” Berlin’s hybrid Atlantic creole is a complicated figure who tends to disrupt hardened oppositions between Europe and Africa,

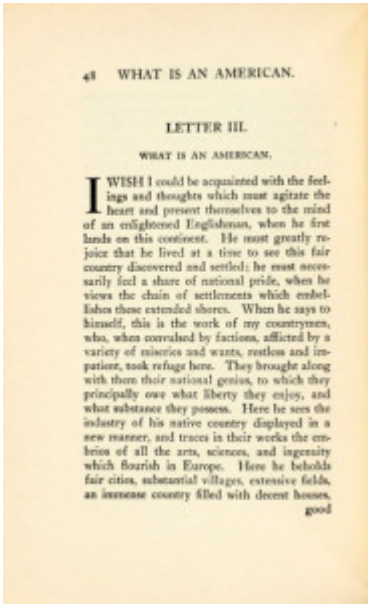
black and white, while also facilitating the expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Paul Gilroy offers a powerful articulation of this type of hybridity in his pathbreaking *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy's Atlantic is animated by "inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas;" its history "yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade." The Black Atlantic, for Gilroy, is an "outernational, transcultural reconceptualisation;" it is a response to cultural nationalism and ethnic absolutism. Advocates of political positions ranging from the left to the right "have fallen back on the idea of cultural nationalism, on the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'black' and 'white' people." Against this, Gilroy offers "another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity. From the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism, this would be a litany of pollution and impurity." Gilroy's version of hybridity encompasses the sort of figures that Berlin found in the Atlantic origins of New World slavery. But it also embraces the cultural and political forms that emerge after centuries of diaspora. As Gilroy points out, when we "reconsider Frederick Douglass's relationship to English and Scottish radicalism," "meditate on the significance of William Wells Brown's five years in Europe as a fugitive slave," or explore "Martin Delany's experiences at the London congress of the International Statistical Congress in 1860," we are forced to realize that modernity itself is hybridized.

But are the hybrid, transnational figures created by the Atlantic world inevitably disruptive, simply because they cannot be reduced to stable racial categories or contained within the boundaries of the nation? In fact, these figures also animated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the service of both white racial consolidation and national imperial expansion. The figure is common, if overlooked, and I will take but two instances. The first comes from a canonical and, in some respects, archetypal trans-Atlantic text: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782); the other, from an obscure, nineteenth-century study of incestuous reproduction. Both texts, in different ways, construct a transnational, hybrid body bounded by whiteness as an agent of both imperial expansion into the continent and novel difference from its putative origins on the European continent. Here the transnational hybrid reinforces a white, nationalist and imperialist body rather than undermining it.

Letters from an American Farmer is, of course, a central player in the canon of Early American literature; it appears on countless college syllabi and is invoked by historians as different as Arthur M. Schlesinger and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. It is also, at least on its surface, a quintessentially transnational, trans-Atlantic text. *Letters* was written in English by a Frenchman, though a naturalized British subject, who adopted the identity of an American farmer to describe the new republic. In the decades after its

publication it was translated into French, Dutch and German and printed in a half dozen locations around Europe. The transnational literary historical task would, perhaps, be to work out its place in an international print culture and the logistics of its circulation. Such an approach, which tracks a particular commodity, thus constitutes the transnational as a system of markets and trade networks. In this telling, casting *Letters from an American Farmer* as a national text is to impose artificial constraints on a more properly transnational text. Yet, a closer look at the transnational elements *within* the text itself works to a different end, not in the spaces between and among nations, but at the intimate level of the body, where Crèvecoeur creates a national creature out of transnational conjugality.



48 WHAT IS AN AMERICAN.

LETTER III.

WHAT IS AN AMERICAN.

I WISH I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman, when he first lands on this continent. He must greatly rejoice that he lived at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled; he must necessarily feel a share of national pride, when he views the chain of settlements which embellishes these extended shores. When he says to himself, this is the work of my countrymen, who, when convulsed by factions, afflicted by a variety of miseries and wants, restless and impatient, took refuge here. They brought along with them their national genius, to which they principally owe what liberty they enjoy, and what substance they possess. Here he sees the industry of his native country displayed in a new manner, and traces in their works the embrios of all the arts, sciences, and ingenuity which flourish in Europe. Here he beholds fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good

Fig. 2. Title page of Letter III: What Is An American? Page 48 from Letters from an American Farmer …, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1793). Taken from a reprint of the original book, Albert & Charles, New York, 1925. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In Letter III, “What is an American?” Crèvecoeur distinguishes the body of the American from that of the European. The American, he claims is “a mixture of English, Scottish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have risen.” This national, distinctly American body is the product of transnational sexual relations. Significantly, those relations are exclusively white. In one of the most widely quoted passages in early American literature, Crèvecoeur asks “What, then, is the American, this new man?” He answers that the American

> is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose

present four sons have now four wives of different nations.

The American casts off “all his ancient prejudices and manners” and “receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.” In America, “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.” Crèvecoeur’s Americans are nothing less than the rightful heirs of western civilization; they are “the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them the great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry began long since in the East; they will finish the great circle.” While this is of course dependent on trans-Atlantic European migratory patterns, the transnational body is constituted at the intimate level of conjugality. And it is a body and conjugality created in discourse; hybridity is not only a critical concept that we can deploy historically to disrupt fixed categories of race and nation, it also has a history of its own, one that, in this case, is created in a very small transnational space.

If Crèvecoeur’s American, a transnational hybrid par excellence, disrupts European nationalities, it also forms the basis of a new national body, “a new race of men.” This, however, is not the Atlantic creole or the hybrid figure of the black Atlantic; rather, it is a white body, whose very existence is threatened by the possibility of cross-racial hybridity. When Crèvecoeur turns to the backcountry of the frontier, he finds degeneration and suggests that this is a product of the wrong kind of hybridity. “Thus our bad people are those who are half cultivators and half hunters; and the worst of them are those who have degenerated altogether in to the hunting state. As old ploughmen and new men of the woods, as Europeans and new-made Indians, they contract the vices of both; they adopt the moroseness and ferocity of a native, without his mildness or even his industry at home.” The problem here is one of the wrong kind of hybridity and the absence of white transnational bodies. In the backcountry what is missing is the transnational whiteness of the American; in its place is the national body of the European who degenerates in contact with Indians, turning into a savage who makes “the manners of the Indian native [seem] respectable.”

The threat of bodily and cultural degeneration that accompanies Crèvecoeur’s frontier disappears in the transnational white body of mid-nineteenth century physiology. In 1858, S.M. Bemiss, a Louisville physician, published an enormous statistical survey of incestuous offspring and their various maladies in *The Transactions of the American Medical Association*. After analyzing 873 cases, most of whom were located in asylums, Bemiss concluded “that multiplication of the same blood by in-and-in marrying does incontestably lead in the aggregate to the physical and mental depravation of the offspring.” Bemiss saw incest as a problem facing all classes and ethnic groups in the United States, claiming that the lack of systematic study of consanguineous reproduction could not have stemmed from a lack of evidence. “The neglect to accumulate statistical testimony as to the results of family intermarriage could not have proceeded

from paucity of material," he wrote, "since, not only do the pages of history teem with instances of such marriage, but they are found in almost every social circle, and should receive the earnest scrutiny of physiologists."

Bemiss's study lent statistical physiological weight to what was becoming the dominant justification of the incest prohibition in the antebellum United States. Rather than a moral and cultural law, derived in large part from theological sources, the incest prohibition was becoming a hard and fast physiological law, whose only reason lay in the possibility of hereditary degeneration. As the phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler wrote almost a decade prior to Bemiss's study, "though the correctness of this general law, that offspring inherit the mental and physical characteristics of their parents, is unquestionable, yet it is modified by several sub-laws, or other hereditary principles, one of which is that the children of near relatives either fall far below their parentage, or else are mal-formed or idiotic." Given the emergent force of this explanation of the incest prohibition, which was paralleled by the increasing inclusion of first cousins in domestic relations laws of kin restriction of marriage, it should come as something of a surprise that Bemiss found an exception to the physiological prohibition in the transnational, hybrid white body.

In a speech delivered before the Louisville Medical Club prior to publication of his report, Bemiss offered a speculative analysis that tied incest to the contours of national development. In the speech, the transnational body knitted westward expansion, incest, and immigration together into one problematic, if purifying, national project. Early communities in "the West … were separated from each other and from the older States, by miles of dangerous wilderness. It was natural that each community should be composed in a great degree of blood relations … When in their new homes, a scarcity of marriageable material would often render unions between relations expedient, and afterward, these covenants, arising at first from necessity, became a habit, often convenient in some respects, since it preserved estates within the family circle." The small populations and geographical seclusion that led to frequent incest would presumably lead to higher rates of hereditary degeneration, and such might have been the case, Bemiss claimed, for isolated populations in "the valleys of the Alps" and "in this country, the Jews." Yet miraculously, such was not the case in the West. There, "these pioneers were a hardy, robust people, living much in the open air, and undergoing vigorous exercise; having for their aliment wild game and the fresh products of a genial soil, and not addicted to any habits calculated to impair the integrity of their well-endowed constitutions. We would naturally expect conditions of life so favorable to the sound development of the bodily organism to overrule all counteracting influences," and so, for Bemiss, they did. Despite his claims a year later, there was an antidote to incestuous reproduction—the sanguine environs of the West. The geographical blessings of the ever-expanding United States ameliorated the potentially degenerative effects of incest.

But if geography was one ameliorative, the constitution of the people was the

other. Who were these intrepid, incestuous, robust pioneers of whom Bemiss spoke? They were Americans, of course, whose "extraordinary activity and energy" were "due to the composite nature of their blood." The absence of racial purity in the United States, that is, "the ingrafting of nations differing in constitution and temperament from each other," produced "the most vigorous people." Transnational hybridity, ethnic and national intermarriage and sex, produced a vigorous national body that flouted the hereditary rules of incest. This was, however, hybridity within limits. "I do not look upon mulattoes as hybrids," Bemiss wrote, "but think they exhibit less of vigor and vital force than are found in crosses where there is less contrast." The racial characteristic of the nation—transnational hybrid whiteness—in its "ingrafting of nations" worked against the usually degenerative effects of incest. The force of the American national body is that it is always already a transnational, hybrid body bounded by race, and thus draws on the strengths of transnational Europe without suffering the degeneracy and decadence of the national European body. Yet, as both Crèvecoeur and Bemiss suggest, transnational hybrid whiteness, the *raison d'être*of which is, in both cases, imperial expansion, is always threatened by its colonial, subaltern subjects.

If we turn to the transnational as a critical frame in order to expose the fragility of the nation, where do we turn to the expose the fragility of the transnational? No one would deny that the transnational frame is enormously useful. But in tracing transnational, Atlantic, and hemispheric circulation and hybridity, in pursuing ever grander geographic scales, we lose sight of the intimate. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that the intimate but transnational body of racialized imperialism becomes encrypted, concealed by sometimes overly capacious scales. Here, a critical history of transnationalism acts as a thorn in the side of escalating geopolitical scales. After all, the intimate body—transnational, hybrid, and white—is the body of a democratic national imperialism. Crèvecoeur's new American and Bemiss's pioneer represent the disciplinary force of national-imperial expansion and white racial formation. In these two instances from the archive of transnational intimacy, transnational bodies do not disrupt race so much as secure it. They evidence national sovereignty that is on the ascent, not on the wane. For Crèvecoeur and Bemiss, the transnational is not the antidote to the nation but instead a necessary condition of national expansion.

Let me be clear: I am not making a revanchist argument for privileging the nation over and against the transnational. The intimate, transnational body, the nation, the Atlantic—no one of these represents *the*proper scale through which we can find an authentic early America. Too often transnational or Atlantic frames are self-congratulatory, as if we have somehow liberated ourselves from the artificial constraints of the nation and found the authentic and truthful. But let us pause for a moment—the authentic, the truthful, escapes from artifice and power? How have we reached this point and why do so many scholars seem relieved? Rather than relief we should feel a great deal of anxiety to be writing at the same scale and deploying the same terms as global capitalism.

This is a problem facing not just early American studies, but the historical discipline at large. Extranational scales have been invoked not only as the antidote to the nation but the discipline's saving grace, moving us beyond an ill-fated dalliance with poststructuralism. This, in no uncertain terms, is a mistake, not least because it makes little sense to oppose the critical frames associated with poststructuralism and the current infatuation with extranational scales. Too often transnational and Atlantic studies in early American studies are marked by a precritical empiricism. Now that we have righted ourselves from the mistakes of discourse, language, and systems of knowledge, they seem to say, we can carry on with proper history writing. This is misguided, and indeed naïve, and the stakes of such a position are political, not just disciplinary. This should be most apparent in early America and the Atlantic world, the origins of which are coeval with European imperialism and the murky beginnings of modernity. We risk making all modernity a teleological march to the deterritorialized global capitalism of the twenty-first century when we abandon critique. And in doing so our self-congratulatory moves toward inclusion of bodies and things lost in the obscuring frame of the nation make us potentially complicit with that which many of us claim to oppose. If we ignore critical history, especially in regard to these extranational scales, we do so at great risk.

Further reading

The quotes on the Atlantic and the hybrid come from the following sources: David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, edited by David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York, 2002); Jack P. Greene, "Beyond Power: Paradigm Subversion and Reformulation and the Re-Creation of the Early Modern Atlantic World," in *Interpreting Early America: Historiographical Essays* (Charlottesville and London, 1996); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). Crèvecoeur's writings on the transnational body are from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, edited by Albert E. Stone (New York, 1981). S.M. Bemiss's writings on incest appear in two places: "Report on the Influence of Marriages of Consanguinity upon Offspring,"*Transactions of the American Medical Association* (1858); and "On the Evil Effects of Marriages of Consanguinity," *Atlanta Medical and Surgical Journal* (1856). Critical history has its roots in the work of Michel Foucault, although it should not be read as simply a dogmatic adherence to his work. See, for example, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" and the essays and interviews collected in *The Politics of Truth* (New York, 2007). For a contemporary critical history manifesto, see Joan Wallach Scott, "History-writing as Critique," in *Manifestoes for History*, edited by Sue Morgan, Keith Jenkins, and Alun Munslow (London and New York, 2007). For examples of what a critical transnational history of early America or the Atlantic might look like, see David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis, 2003); Ian Baucom, *Specters of the*

Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History (Durham, 2005); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700* (Stanford, 2006). Despite being one of the texts that I engage with critically, any critical history of the Atlantic must begin with Gilroy's still stunning book. Finally, the kind of critical history I am advocating here can be found in a new journal, *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, published by the University of Illinois Press and JSTOR. The first issue will appear in Summer 2011.

This article originally appeared in issue 11.2 (January, 2011).

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