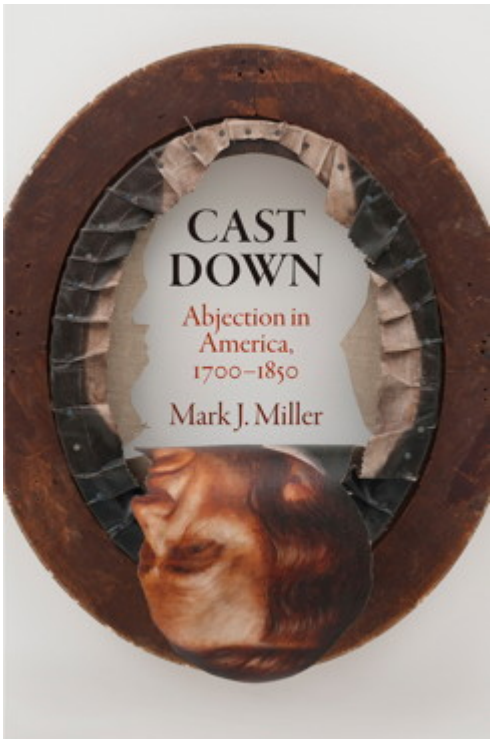
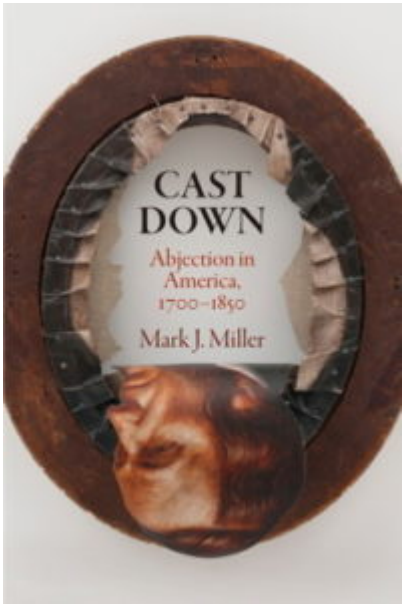
# Strong Abjections




Mark J. Miller, *Cast Down: Abjection in America, 1700–1850.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 240 pp., $49.95.

Mark J. Miller's *Cast Down: Abjection in America, 1700–1850* plumbs a series of interpersonal metaphors in the writings by and representations of marginalized Americans to argue that suffering is central to the tenor of dissent in the Atlantic world. As Miller argues, suffering licenses and legitimates the speech of those with limited access to print public spheres. Pain, as an entryway to publicity, is a queer agent in this study, empowering *through* disempowering individuals and providing them with the rationale to court a readership even as

they retain positions of abjectness. This paradox—of empowerment through pain, voice through silence, and agency through abjection—runs through Miller's book, and it allows him to offer subtle and new readings of canonical texts while also deepening our understanding of their historical contexts.

I first wish to applaud the capacious versatility of *Cast Down*. This versatility is best on display when Miller connects abjection to religious conversion and discourses of race and sexuality. Even more, Miller seeks to locate the operations of certain psychoanalytic categories—such as masochism—before their coherence into the twentieth-century categories we understand today. What I find of immense value to that project is his ability to work between theoretical and historical registers, in one breath distinguishing Leo Bersani's and Judith Butler's valorizations of subjection and then showing their bearing, for instance, on the posthumous circulation of Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative." Although Miller differentiates his categories of analysis from more contemporary psychoanalytic concepts, he usefully suggests that his study of masochism encourages scholars to ask how "eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts and writers helped create material, intellectual, and emotional conditions of possibility for sexological and psychoanalytic taxonomies?" (7). These "conditions of possibility" suggest a type of Foucauldian genealogy that transposes in richly compelling ways what may seem like anachronistic associations between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries across to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Cast Down* thus can serve as a model for future scholarship that combines theoretical incisiveness with historical specificity.

Miller's book centers on the queerness of suffering, theorizing modes of abjection that destabilize and shift sexual and racial identifications. Following a Christian history that valorizes suffering, and explicitly describing his "book's movement from Foxe to Freud" (12), Miller shows how "abjection can be used to create, sustain, and contest racial, sexual, and gendered identities" (6). Examining a broad archive of materials, from Jonathan Edwards's *Faithful Narrative* (1737) to a printed woodcut of abolitionist icon Jonathan Walker's branded hand (1845), and from William Apess's reformist *A Son of the Forest* (1829) to martyrological figures in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Moby-Dick* (1851), this book offers a textured literary history: indeed, the chapter titles themselves ("Conversion, Suffering, and Publicity," "Indian Abjection in the Public Sphere," "The Martyrology of White Abolitionists," and "Masochism, Minstrelsy, and Liberal Revolution") provocatively announce the book's contribution to studies of race, religion, and sexuality in early America. As a brief overview of *Cast Down*'s historical arguments, chapter one explains that the "ambivalent embrace" of converts by an emerging evangelical public set the stage for "the colonial dispossessed"—such as Native Americans, African Americans, and white women—to aspire to public recognition (41); that prepared the way for radical Methodist William Apess to turn "toward the polite literature of the evangelical public," as analyzed in chapter two (80). Chapter three rethinks the histories of "male access to civic abstraction" by following the representation of embodied white suffering to protest black enslavement—a

gesture, Miller argues, that eclipses the very cause of abolition, wherein it permits white men to speak over black men and women (101). Chapter four focuses on "the complexities of masochism for men of color" (119) by reexamining Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, offering a nuanced reading of how it "produce[d] a more complex account of blackness than earlier humanitarian abolitionist writing" (144). Lastly, the epilogue turns to *Moby-Dick*'s Pip, contextualizing him within Orientalist "child pet" traditions while arguing that Melville uses this figure to highlight "the tension between the moral and the erotic" in abolitionist discourse (156).

As one might anticipate, Miller gravitates toward the strong, overwhelming feelings and desires archived in the likes of Puritan Thomas Shepard's journal—with "his need to 'desire Christ and taste Christ and roll myself upon Christ'" (34)—and narrated in "Pip's extreme emotional response to Ahab's kindness" (164). These strong feelings connect the various figures across the long temporal span of the study (over a century and a half). Even though Pip's drive toward self-destruction at the novel's end indicates his structural (and racialized) abjection, Miller shows how his drastic response also points toward "Melville's refusal to allow Pip's self-abasement to redeem Ahab" (161). More pointedly, Miller argues, because suffering shapes one's access to a public, the public pay-off of that suffering differs according to race and sexuality. Whereas eighteenth-century figures such as Edwards and George Whitefield access redemption through their represented suffering, such is unavailable to Pip, who cannot redeem Ahab, much less himself. Put more directly, abjection has ineluctably shaped racial and sexual politics in the United States. Although this stands as irreproachable historicism, this presentation of black subjection and white agency seems somehow yet unfinished. One wonders if there are alternative readings of these power dynamics latent in Miller's archive. Miller even approaches that possibility in his introduction, explaining that his "broader framework can help expand the horizons for contemporary queer readings of masochistic sexuality, as eighteenth-century evangelical negotiations of power, publicity, sex, and gender inform embodied and imagined pleasures in both the past and the present" (21), yet the gravitational pull of the more familiar narrative tugs the argument away from this prospect.

There is much to praise in *Cast Down*, in terms both of argument and method, and so to conclude I would like to gesture to one of Miller's most prominent interventions in the fields of religion and secular studies. As noted above, *Cast Down* illuminates the centrality of religious discourse in constituting racial and sexual difference by reclaiming the generative possibilities of abjection. Examining what he calls "scenes of abjection" (12), a nod to Saidiya Hartman, Miller shows how religious discourse—and its representations—imbued suffering with specific meanings that reverberated with racialized implications in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To date, many books and articles have approached the so-called public spheres of early America under the guise of Habermas's declension narrative (the fall from a disinterestedly republican eighteenth century to a compromised liberal nineteenth century). Miller's turn to "feminist anthropological and psychoanalytic criticism" (6) to retell that

story is refreshing. Thinking with Hortense Spillers's "vestibulary publicity" (17) as a counterpoint to Habermas's rational public sphere allows him to show how "embodied differences"—produced through structural inequities "in health, safety, labor, speech, [and] writing"—always already foreground access to publicness. Miller emphasizes how the Habermasian conception of the public sphere relies on the abjection of certain bodies that bear the marks of their exclusion. Miller imagines, instead, how "the vestibulary public reveals the trace of those most marked by abjection, as well as the structuring principles of abjection—of inclusion and exclusion—that underlie all similar structures" (18). In this way, Miller offers a vocabulary for understanding how abjection and exclusion constitute our dominant understandings of the public sphere. The surprising discoveries gained as Miller moves away from a static notion of the public sphere and toward its "vestibulary" recesses provide compelling possibilities for rethinking the sexual, racial, and religious politics of early America. *Cast Down* not only reads well-known narratives and novels in smart and nuanced ways but also creates an opening—we might say it casts down a foundation—through which to ask new questions about the culture and history of early and nineteenth-century America.

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