

The Relational Turn



Caroline Wigginton's *In the Neighborhood* joins a new and vital wave of scholarship critically examining the affective ties that bound people together in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British American world. In the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars of women sought to demonstrate the very real conflicts that marked the lives (and the bodies) of their early modern subjects. Although these divisions had been examined and traced by scholars in the papers and archives of early modern men since the 1960s, this group of pathbreaking scholars of women—such as Elaine Crane, Patricia Crawford, Laura Gowing, Jane Kamensky, and Jennifer Morgan—offered an essential counter-narrative in their own scholarship: seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British American women fought, slandered, and preyed upon one another. They policed each other, took each other to court, and screamed accusations at each other in the streets. They meted out punishments, physical and emotional. They enslaved other women. These actions were expected of them, as in this period women were imagined to be sharp-tongued, petty, and driven to gossip. Many women lived up to these terrible expectations. They lived in and were marked by a violent world, and in their violent actions sought autonomy, belonging, and survival.



Caroline Wigginton, *In the Neighborhood: Women's Publication in Early America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. 232 pp., \$85.

But in the past five to ten years, scholars of British America have offered a corrective to the image of an early modern world riven entirely by discord. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British America was a ferocious place, but it was also one in which powerful norms, laws, and dicta drove women and men to cooperate and live peaceably. How early modern people negotiated and reconciled

the expectations that bound them together with the realities that drove them apart has been the subject of studies by authors such as Caleb Crain, Nicole Eustace, Cassandra Good, Naomi Tadmor, and Karin Wulf (as well as myself). These works focusing on an affective or relational seventeenth and eighteenth century resonate in some, although not all, ways with the new field of the history of emotion in their recognition that one of the many methods through which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century people sought social cohesion was via displays of positive feeling: expressions of love, professions of sister- and brotherhood, promises of concord and companionship. Caroline Wigginton's book also participates in this broad scholarly conversation, as the author traces how women's publications allowed them residence in early American neighborhoods, both real and imagined. These "relational publications" could help early American women to build consensus, senses of self, and ultimately, the author argues, an American republic (6).

In the Neighborhood offers a boldly argued and compelling alternative to the traditional narrative of the imagined communities of early America. Alongside the "certain men who fostered the nation through republican print," Wigginton reveals the many different kinds of American women—including women of color, lower-status women, and dissenting or exiled women—who participated in the public dialogues that helped to constitute an American sense of national identity (1). Wigginton explodes open the definition of a publication, arguing that any communicate that "makes public an expression of its author, invites a reading, submits itself to circulation" should be counted and considered alongside the elite, masculinized, formal writings that scholars of early America have chosen to represent the republican canon (5). Wigginton's chapters are structured around breathtakingly and refreshingly different genres of publication. These include belts of black beads woven by Lenape women, funeral elegies written by former slaves, Quaker commonplace books, and diplomatic marches led and performed by Creek women: for Wigginton, all of these public expressions were publications, and all of them allowed women to shape early American community. The author's evidence is rich and compelling, with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources from Savannah and Newport compared with those from New York and Philadelphia, although there is a particular focus on British colonial cultures and legacies rather than Dutch, French, Spanish, or Portuguese ones.

Throughout the book Wigginton works hard and well to offer careful attention to the many different kinds of neighborhoods that existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and shows an admirable willingness to engage with and analyze relationships that would never have been understood as traditional "friendships" in the period—itsself a limited category of relation allowed to only a limited kind or number of people. An especially good example of this occurs in chapter two, "Vexing Motherhood and Interracial Intimacy," where Wigginton investigates the "asymmetrical and at times uncomfortable intimacy" between Sarah Osborn, a white slaveowner and schoolmistress, and Phillis, an enslaved woman who was the mother of a boy over whom Osborn claimed mastery (63). Sarah Osborn and Phillis socialized together, prayed together, and argued

with one another, and Wigginton carefully pulls each singular, complex layer of their relationship back to demonstrate how the women each used this relationship for their own ends. Wigginton's acknowledgement that difficult and unequal relationships could still create senses of neighborhood, and that all of these attachments—even ones rimmed in fury, despair, ambivalence, or jealousy—were critical American relations, is an important one. In our explorations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sociability, it is crucial to recognize the inherent strains between prescriptive expectation and practical experience, as well as the variety and complexity of relationships themselves.

Wigginton manages these deftly, but as *In the Neighborhood* focuses on publication—the ways in which British American women made themselves heard, albeit subtly, differently, or contrarily—I was left wondering about times when these women were forced into silence, and when their gorgeously complex, messy relationships allowed them to silence one another. In the introduction, Wigginton describes how in their letters, two “impoverished and marginalized” Narragansett women “enacted and denied affinities by insisting on particularity, thereby prefiguring autonomy” (15). It is worth thinking carefully about that interpretive jump between particularity and autonomy, particularly in regards to public speech, thought, and action. This was a society in which autonomy or individuality was often read as strangeness, and then brutally punished. It was a society that sought to stamp out distinction and self-determination by quickly and abruptly silencing anything foreign, alien, other. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British diaspora, people who spoke or acted out had their writings banned or burned in public bonfires, were locked into solitary confinement in prisons, or were bored through the tongue with hot irons. People (and sometimes exclusively or especially women) were threatened or punished with the branks, the gag, and the scold's bridle, and with being ducked underwater, deprived of breath and voice. Enslaved people were silenced in the most cruelly and horribly effective ways of all, as they faced physical tortures while also being systematically, deliberately, and unswervingly denied access to speech, selfhood, and education. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, people whose public speech or actions marked them as different were taught, told, and made to *shut up right now*, and many methods of punishment ensured that they stayed muzzled, sometimes permanently. Discord was a part of early American relationships, but discord could also be anonymizing, erasing self and voice and independence through very real punishment and pain.

In the Neighborhood does not seek to, nor should it necessarily have to, examine the dynamics of relational silencing in addition to those of relational publication. But as scholars continue to explore the relational turn, and to uncover and problematize the ties that stubbornly, vexingly bound together the women and men of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world, we must grapple with just how sophisticated and intricate those relationships could be.

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