

*Introduction*  
*Gender Criticism in the Age of Trump*  
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Moving across genres and centuries, *Gender in American Literature and Culture* demonstrates how gender has structured American literary history and how rigid inscriptions of gender have perpetuated a legacy of violence and exclusion in the United States. The chapters in this collection move beyond inflexible categories of masculinity and femininity that often have reinforced restrictive assumptions about public and private spaces, work and domesticity, individualism and community, to offer more nuanced readings of literary conventions and genres from early American writings to the present. By challenging established models of authorship and gender, contributors to this volume begin to account for the many, shifting facets of gendered identities and their textual representations. *Gender in American Literature and Culture* thinks about gender intersectionally, as a category best understood in relation to racial, ethnic, class, and other identity markers such as religion, ability, age, and sexual orientation, and contributors explore nonbinary gender identifications as well as a broad range of normative models for girls and women, boys and men.

The chapters here also respond to a sense of cultural and political crisis – one that often finds gender at its center – by illuminating the literary histories and cultural imaginaries that have set the stage for urgent contemporary debates. The divisiveness of the current American political climate and the renewal of white patriarchal nationalism demands that we reckon with the treatment of gender in American literary and cultural history. Indeed, many chapters here ask an implicit question: What can the presidency of Donald Trump teach us about gender and American literary history? Against political threats to American institutions, families, homes, persons, communities, and cultures, we have seen a major resurgence of feminist activism and thought across publics and institutions, from Women’s Marches and #MeToo to #MMIW (Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women).<sup>1</sup>

*Gender in American Literature and Culture* responds to this cultural and political moment with chapters that are presentist and activist but also keen to avoid overreaching. This volume was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive wave of anti-racism demonstrations that swept the nation and the world in early summer 2020, fueled by the disproportionate harms the pandemic visited upon BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and by the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man. For many people across the United States and around the world, these events brought into sharp focus the racism and inequities at the heart of our nation's institutions as well as the need to grapple with their representations in our cultural artifacts. We are confident that readers who wish to better understand how gendered models of white supremacy have flourished in American life and letters will find much to consider in our contributors' chapters. Many of the chapters interrogate the very injustices that inspired the reckoning of 2020.

While we believe that understanding the cultural and historical operations of gender in the United States is more pressing than ever, we also recognize that a chastened model of literary criticism has emerged, one that is less confident in its transformative potential, more skeptical of liberatory claims, and more modest in its sense of what it can accomplish. Times like these put the grand, empty gesture into particularly stark relief. In this historical moment of retrenchment and doubt, gender, feminist, queer, anti-racist and postcolonial scholars – who have always professed a commitment to linking theory with praxis – are confronting the limitations of criticism more directly and returning, yet again, to the timeworn question of why literature matters. A recent assessment of the legacy of Ann Douglas's landmark *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) argues that literary critics have not yet answered the most important question posed by her work, namely, what is the public role of the literary scholar? What wider social value does our work have?<sup>2</sup>

Feminist criticism of American literature, which emerged as a distinct field of study in the 1970s on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and the second wave of the US women's rights movement, has always purported, at least, to address such questions. Initially focused on reinterpreting texts by men and attending to previously ignored works by women, scholars in the field have continued to pursue those ends.<sup>3</sup> But they have also questioned the terms by which those goals were set and advanced new hermeneutics that unsettle the fixed binaries – such as male/female and normative/anti-normative – that have structured decades of critical inquiry.<sup>4</sup> New developments in feminist method feature an ever-expanding vision of the literary archive, including digital

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editions and projects, and a newly resonant engagement with interdisciplinary fields, including science studies, environmental humanities, affect theory, childhood studies, and food studies.<sup>5</sup>

This collection manifests many, if not all, of these developments in its array of interdisciplinary approaches and its introduction of new ways to read and analyze a growing archive of American literature. Our contributors follow in the wake of previous critics who have redefined some of the texts that are considered canonical as well as the questions critics ask about literary work. We honor the tradition of feminist recovery projects by including discussions of archival Indigenous writings and overlooked Arab American fiction along with new readings of well-known works such as Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Against the well-entrenched white patriarchy that has often narrowly defined what counts as literary, we offer a range of literary and textual recovery models that chart many paths of gender variance, attend to recently digitized texts and texts by marginalized authors, analyze instances of sexual violence that have been right in front of us but somehow gone unremarked, and even critique the notion of recovery itself as a flawed ideal. Although not comprehensive in its coverage – in keeping with its emphasis on the current historical moment, it tilts toward twentieth-century and contemporary literature – the collection gives readers a substantial sampling of the variety and depth of gender-based scholarship on American literature. Its chapters cite texts by forty-three white authors and forty-six writers of color, written as early as 1630 and as recently as 2018. It gives special attention to the genre of the novel, but it also addresses sermons, poems, short stories, drama, memoirs, essays, and nonfiction prose. The innovation and elasticity of the collection's chapters demonstrate the ongoing promise of scholarship on gender.

Expansive aspirations notwithstanding, *Gender in American Literature and Culture* also recognizes that critical attempts to debunk American exceptionalism have failed to substantially undo the white male canon and the dominance of patriarchal ideas. Critics can't ignore the evidence that decades of canon-busting have barely nudged white male authors from their primacy of place in the lists of what is taught and studied most often in American universities.<sup>6</sup> The Trump administration's embrace of white patriarchy is far from a political or cultural aberration; indeed, white patriarchy continues to be *the* central organizing category of American literary expression. The current state of American literary studies may indicate less a failure to progress than a successful preservation of the status

quo, a perspective that Brigitte Fielder articulates powerfully, if more narrowly, in her chapter on white feminist failure in the work of nineteenth-century writer and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Although our contributors remain invested in American literary expression as a meaning-making enterprise, they also manifest a widespread conviction that US literary history is, was, and has always been on a fraught trajectory. Accepting that scholars of gender have obscured and extended some of the deep roots of the oppressive systems they have claimed to uproot, these chapters move, albeit uncertainly, toward what Dana D. Nelson calls “a more granular notion of power and agency, a humbler form of critique.”<sup>7</sup>

The collection is organized into two sections and topics critical to gender and American literary studies, “Intimacies” and “Aggressions,” with a final, third section that identifies “New Directions” for the field. The first two sections connect thematically chapters that range from the literature of the early national period to twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts. We begin with “Intimacies,” which addresses how American literature has reflected and shaped changing ideas about home, kinship, love, care, sex, and national belonging. Chapters in this section unsettle what Lauren Berlant has called the “hegemonic fantasies” of intimacy that have thrived in “minds and on . . . bodies,” and examine subjects such as early American sexuality in Benjamin Franklin’s “Advice to a Friend on Choosing a Mistress,” maternal sorrow and emotional pain in the literature of slavery, and contemporary life narratives about aging and changing notions of agency, dependency, and caregiving.<sup>8</sup> Several chapters in this section expose how forms of intimacy often are inextricable from violence. “Aggressions” builds on the insights in “Intimacies” to analyze how race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality intersect and underscore gendered violence in American literature and culture; it includes chapters on violence against Indigenous women in early American missionary schools, cultures of sexual harassment in early twentieth-century fiction, white supremacy’s de-gendering of Black men, and the antiheroic masculinity of white male combat veterans. The collection concludes with New Directions, which identifies new critical methods in literary studies of gender and analyzes their relationship to present issues in American literature and culture. While all of our contributors are mindful of how literary texts have forecast current gender crises, the chapters in “New Directions” demonstrate more directly the continued relevance of the literary imagination in our contemporary moment. This section considers how the modernist tradition of literary experimentation anticipates newly recognized gender-fluid categories, rereads methods of literary recovery through feminist disability

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studies, interrogates gender and minority voices in digital spaces, and theorizes the politics of affect and futurity in contemporary Native American women's poetry. By promoting conversation between and among the chapters in "Intimacies," "Aggressions," and "New Directions," this book demonstrates how much we still stand to gain by studying the lasting, varied, and sometimes unpredictable operations of gender from the early national period to the nation's divided present.

### Intimacies

From eighteenth-century seduction novels to Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person" – a *New Yorker* short story about a disturbing relationship between a young female college student and a slightly older man that went viral in 2017 – literary accounts have set expectations and sparked debates about intimate choices and practices. The "Intimacies" section analyzes writings about close interpersonal bonds and interior spaces, both psychic and physical, building on the work of generations of gender scholars who have taught us that, while such bonds and interiorities are often experienced by individuals as intensely private, they are always shaped by the decidedly nonprivate imperatives of institutions and social structures, including churches, governments, family systems, and marriage laws. Yet American writers have never imagined intimate lives in lockstep with inflexible gender binaries and hierarchies; US literary history is replete with representations of intimacies forged by struggles against and violations of those very binaries and hierarchies.

White impressibility and white female vulnerability are crucial elements in this section; several chapters reveal just how effectively white femininity has been used to justify, rationalize, and perpetuate white supremacy. Framing her analysis of literary representations of white women's sexual vulnerability with the Commerce Clause of the US Constitution, Anna Mae Duane tracks the racialized and gendered dimensions of female sexual consent, imprisonment, and the disavowal of white women's desire through Puritan execution sermons, seduction novels, slave narratives, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Duane shows that the logical incoherence of slavery required "varieties of female unfreedom" to be distributed along a racialized spectrum that rendered white women exquisitely impressible, naturally designed to crave sexual submission, unable to survive the world of commerce, unable to consent to extramarital sex, and doomed to death by their erotic misadventures. Meanwhile, enslaved women, defined as property, are allowed no sexual consent and

denied domestic protection. In slave narratives, Black women who are sent to prison achieve respite, not punishment. Duane reads Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, a white woman who survives the ignominy of extramarital pregnancy and aligns herself with the resilience of enslaved women, as yet another extension of white privilege and the logic of enclosure. Hester's new respectability is purchased through the repentance and death of the man who elicited her sexual consent, and the novel ends with Hester wearing her scarlet letter in a cozy cottage, sewing baby clothes. As Duane's analysis suggests, at times literary critics have been too quick to endorse deviance as the only effective model of resistance to oppression.

Marion Rust's chapter makes white women's complicity in their own confinement especially vivid; her analysis of the sexy older woman in a newly accessible novel first published in 1810 shows just how fully white women were expected to disavow their desires to maintain access (albeit highly circumscribed) to influence, approval, and power. Rust analyzes a character who, unlike Hester Prynne, bears no sign of her willingness to violate social norms. Building on the notion of sexuality as a textual phenomenon and aging as a narrative, Rust develops a richly layered reading of a central and memorable character, Mrs. Dorinda Charmion, in *Rosa, or American Genius and Education*. Rust considers the didactic function of early American narrative and finds that mature female sexuality has been rendered largely inert. According to the anonymous author of *Rosa*, Rust argues, to be a desirable postmenopausal woman is to be a person incapable of pleasure, someone who has so distanced herself from desire that she exists only as an object to instruct others. The novel casts the charming Mrs. Charmion's reticence as tantamount to truth and her disavowal of desire as synonymous with her sexual appeal; her refusal to tell stories or express desire assures her virtue and preserves her attractiveness.

In another chapter that, like Rust's, corrects gender historians' tendency to exalt flagrant breaks with convention, Travis M. Foster chronicles nineteenth-century America's hostility toward the white effeminate man and posits Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) as a familiar, telling instance of a crucial but neglected figure, produced by the intersection of misogyny and white supremacy. Reading Crane as an overcivilized icon in the context of queer and transgender studies, Foster's chapter reveals untapped solidarities between effeminate gay men, trans women, and femme-identified feminist women. "Effeminophobia," Foster argues, "emerged as a buttress for the binary sex system that had become so crucial within the politics of white liberalism and the biopolitics of white supremacy." Why, Foster asks, does hostility

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toward femininity remain so durable? Through a cultural history of the effeminate man, Foster reorients readers toward the oppositional potential of some forms of conventionality.

Analyzing conventions of spiritual expression from an earlier era, Ivy Schweitzer finds evidence of provisional genders and unfixable erotic identifications in Puritan writings and reminds us that scholars have begun to recognize New England Puritanism as a transatlantic phenomenon in conversation with indigenous tribes and traditions. In her discussion of how trans and queer theory can sharpen our understanding of spiritual gender in poetry by Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Emily Dickinson, Schweitzer revisits her own earlier analysis of conflicts within a Puritan patriarchy that endorsed male superiority and dominance but also required male believers to take a submissive and abject, hence feminine, position in relation to God. Schweitzer traces the queering of patriarchy posed by Bradstreet's authorship, Taylor's "life-long transing poetic project," which features imaginative play with bodies, gender, time, and space, and concludes with an exploration of Dickinson's deliberate refusals to abide by fixed conceptions of gender.

The racialization of femininity again comes to the fore in the final three chapters in this section. Shermaine M. Jones, Yu-Fang Cho, and Rachel Adams each explore, from different vantage points, the damage wrought by the exquisite sensibility American culture has attributed to white women, which has obscured the individuality and intensity of Black women's emotional suffering, elevated a notion of reproductive freedom that serves financially secure white women and obfuscates the injustices of racial capitalism, and created a privileged class of white sufferers and underpaid caregivers of color. Making manifest the long trajectory of anguish that led to the record-breaking Black Lives Matter marches of 2020, Jones draws on Ntozake Shange's call to "handle warmly" the pain of Black women and girls and finds a radical ethic of self-care embedded in the fierce representations of maternal sorrow that characterize many nineteenth-century African American writings about slavery. Analyzing sonic agency in texts by Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Solomon Northup, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Jones shows how enslaved women used sound to resist slavery's systematic denial of their expressions of pain. Understanding an ethic of self-care, Jones argues, requires readers to set aside empathy (the ability to feel *for*) and instead attend rigorously to enslaved subjects' historically denied right to feel – and to readers' own complicity in the circulation of Black trauma.

A different mode of complicity – white feminism’s alliance with settler colonialism, dispossession, and the exploitation of human and natural resources – is highlighted in Cho’s chapter, which analyzes Ruth Ozeki’s debut novel *My Year of Meats* (1998). In Cho’s reading, Ozeki’s richly imagined narrative of a multicultural family on both sides of the Pacific showcases the limitations of the idea of individual reproductive choice, which has been founded upon the experiences of normatively white, middle-class women. Unspooling the inadequacies of neoliberal ideals of bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom that have been a white feminist rallying cry for decades, Cho reveals how Ozeki’s transnational narrative pinpoints the inadequacies of multiracial and multicultural models, which ignore how racial differences have been deployed to advance capitalist accumulation.

Capitalism’s relentless focus on productivity comes into even sharper focus in Adams’s chapter, which analyzes the alternative temporalities of dementia and articulates the profound inadequacy of American culture’s view of dependency as a tragic erasure of personhood. Adams demonstrates how much contemporary life narratives can teach us about the phenomenon she calls “slow emergency”: the dramatic rise of Alzheimer’s in the aging population of the United States and the accompanying growth of a gendered and racialized labor collective to serve the needs of a privileged class of dependents. Memoirs by women with Alzheimer’s, Adams observes, are “especially attuned to the gendered experience of becoming-dependent in the face of social scripts that position them as caregivers.” Examining how Gerda Saunders’s *Memory’s Last Breath* and Elinor Fuchs’ *Making an Exit* adapt the genre of the memoir to represent the experience of losing one’s memory, Adams showcases the suppleness of literary expression, even as she names the privileged class to which the writers with dementia belong. Her chapter calls attention to the central but still-unvoiced role that low-wage caregivers – who are overwhelmingly women of color – play in America’s “gray tsunami.” Those same caregivers continued to work in high-risk conditions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Aggressions

While intimacies and aggressions often are inseparable, the chapters in this section demonstrate that gendered violence is endemic to American literary history and culture. The late Toni Morrison writes in *Sources of Self-Regard* that some types of violence and trauma “visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn



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sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.”<sup>9</sup> American literature has told of many such traumas: of genocide, slavery, dispossession, white supremacy, sexual violence, and hate among them, and the chapters in “Aggressions” interrogate how gender informs this “deep and cruel” violence in American literary history. They question the masculinist myth, present since the nation’s founding, of regenerative power in American violence, and they challenge the colonial, imperial project of American history as reflected in our literature. They show how regimes of power produce and enforce racialized, sexualized, and gendered violence that renders subjects disposable and inhuman. They draw attention to the centrality of anti-Black violence, and how for centuries Black bodies in pain have been devoured as national spectacles.<sup>10</sup> They examine how, in an era of perpetual war, violence is normalized and celebrated. And they acknowledge that while “the marrow of American tradition” may have been formed “under the pressures of hatred and violence,” as Eric Sundquist observed in *To Wake the Nations* more than two decades ago, state-sanctioned violence against migrants, women, the poor, and people of color continues not only in our homes and communities but also in our highest houses of government.<sup>11</sup> Literary accounts of intersectional violence have imagined and illuminated a deeply fractured nation that is still in evidence today.

The scholars in this section draw upon critical methodologies in Indigenous, antiracist, Black, ethnic, feminist, and masculinity studies to challenge historical erasures and white patriarchal conventions. Theresa Strouth Gaul writes about Catharine Brown, an early Native woman writer widely recognized for her Indigenous activism, and the unexamined history of sexual violence that influenced her work and legacy. Brown’s letters and diary comprise one of the largest archives of Native women’s writing, yet the evidence of sexual violence in these archives has gone largely unnoticed by scholars. Gaul argues that Indigenous histories must be understood through an examination of the pervasive sexual violence against women and girls. Brown enrolled in the Brainerd Mission school in order to escape stalking, harassment, and possible rape, and there she achieved literacy as well as a measure of authority over her body, sexuality, and person. Against missionary schools’ directive of conversion and assimilation to white patriarchal norms, Gaul reads Brown’s choice to enroll in a missionary school as an example of individual agency and a pathway toward sexual safety.

Susan Bernardin in “Intergenerational Memory and the Making of Indigenous Literary Kinships” also writes about violence against Indigenous women and girls, beginning with Gertude Bonnin’s account

in *American Indian Stories* of her experiences – published several decades after Brown’s – of the trauma and violence that mission schools often perpetuated. Bonnin’s experience illuminates a different aspect of settler colonialism, animated not only by men’s sexual violence toward Indigenous women and girls – from which missionary schools may have provided some measure of safety, as Brown’s example shows – but also by what Bernardin calls “the problem of white women’s investment and complicity in US settler colonialism.” The paleface women whom Bonnin describes in her memoir as reprimanding, infantilizing, and dehumanizing Native children represent and participate in a maternal colonialism that perpetuated gender and sexual violence, separated families, and dispossessed Indigenous people of their lands. Gaul, Bernardin, and Mark Rifkin in “New Directions” together trace a long history of literary representations of and responses to settler practices that violate the sovereignty of tribal lands, communities, families, and bodies. Against settler and maternal colonialism and their expressions of patriarchal white supremacy, Native women writers and artists have turned to literary narrative to resist and reframe their continuing trauma.

Gaul and Bernardin write of the importance of archival recovery of neglected Indigenous texts and contexts, of writing as acts of witness, of kinship networks, and of the resistance Indigenous women writers mount against the pervasive violence of white patriarchy and settler colonialism. They write of the power of stories to change lives and histories marked by violence and aggression. They think intergenerationally and across kinship networks to contemplate how literary history anticipates and informs our current social and political moment. For example, Gaul connects Brown’s story at the turn of the nineteenth century to the current movement to bring attention to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Founded by Indigenous activists to address the contemporary crisis of murdered and missing Indigenous women, MMIW, writes Gaul, also “acts as an important corrective” to the historical “privileging of white women’s stories in discussions of sexual violence,” and brings attention to the diverse experiences and responses of women of color to gender and sexual violence.

Like Gaul, Catherine Keyser exposes sexual violence that has been both ubiquitous and overlooked. Keyser argues that the #MeToo movement requires us to reexamine how we read and what we teach about sexual violence in literature, which, as she notes, marks far more of the fiction we teach than we may recognize. “For readers habituated to conventions of gender and genre,” writes Keyser, “rape culture is often experienced as