

Disciplinary Panic

A Response to Ed White and Michael Drexler

Many of us have been melancholy for a long time without understanding exactly why. Ed White and Michael Drexler help pinpoint the sources of a malaise that stem from feeling alone, so alone, as literary critical work in the field of early American studies is relegated to the status of an oddity or simply ignored. In assessing feelings of historical inadequacy (does one's article have enough footnotes to satisfy empiricists?) that compete with those of literary cowardice (why is work in early American studies often maligned as glorified social studies?), White and Drexler outline a sickness that is at once professional and metaphysical. Their vision invites a Joycean diagnosis: History, we might say, is a discipline from which we are trying to awake. Suffering under an "unspoken apprenticeship in the guild of History," literary critics become other to themselves, toning down the inventiveness of stylistic and formalist analysis while doing their best to appear comfortable in the guise of the historian. The condition is one of disciplinary panic: effeminate traces associated with the literary must be purged even as compulsory historicity takes over by "beefing up" footnotes and "regularizing" expression.

If the implications of this portrait are credited in full, identifying the condition of early Americanist work as Joycean only confirms the metaphorical, imprecise, and belletristic tendencies that are the source of the problem in the first place. Within early American studies, literary scholars feel their deviance keenly: theoretical sophistication often seems like a hyperbolic display of literariness while style is distrusted as academically flamboyant. Hard data are positioned against the prospective, optative, or speculative (read "soft") nature of literary analysis that aspires to theoretical commentary on texts. To guard against such an easy dismissal of literary-theoretical labors, White and Drexler take pains to amass evidence—as though they desire, not speculation, but facts and data as much as other scholars do—for their statements about how a "compromise canon" nega-

tively affects the status of theory within the field. Of course, though, their intervention comes in using figures about publication, the funding of editorial projects, press resources, and library holdings to advance theoretical speculations about the status of history within early American studies itself.

Surveying the publication history of *Early American Literature*, White and Drexler document the field's ambivalent and changing relationship with history in conjunction with its gradual evolution beyond New England literary production. This archive serves up a portrait of a self-hating literary criticism that seeks approval from the very historical establishment it often disdains. It is an account preserved in the fossil records of library shelving. While pre-1800 materials have flourished under the reign of historians, library stacks, like layers of sedimentary rock that provide evidence of mass extinctions, suggest a premature die-off of an early American canon in literary critical environments. White and Drexler sagely observe that these trends "signal [how] institutional resources of money, staff, libraries, presses, and conferences" were organized around "the ever-increasing dominance of history as a discipline." Even after canon expansion and New Historicism introduced significant changes to the field, what counts as knowledge production and scholarly contribution remains underwritten by disciplinary criteria more closely associated with history than literature. White and Drexler make this extended argument, moving from the 1950s and 1960s to contemporary academic practice, by referencing Eric Slauter's argument that literary scholars cite historians without experiencing anything like reciprocity. For a contribution on theory, it is worth remarking how much space White and Drexler give, not to theorizing, but to data and tabulation as if they, too, are always writing to curry favor from more empirically and less theoretically minded readers.

That I share this disciplinary panic can be seen by my own offering of hard data: while the website for the Organization of American Historians lists ten book prizes in the field of American history, the Modern Language Association lists seven, but the bulk of these are intended for work in Italian, French, or composition and only one award, the William Sanders Scarborough Prize in African-American literature, refers to American topics. From 1987 to 2008, the John Hope Franklin Prize, awarded annually by the American Studies Association to the best book published in the field, recognized just two studies that have literature or literary analysis as one of

their primary focuses. More digging into the numbers behind the parceling out of book prizes would likely confirm what readers of White and Drexler's essay will no doubt suspect, namely, that history's hegemony extends to the material tokens of prestige as well. Literary critics can barely count on award committees to provide readers for their books, not through any fault of the judges, but because there are few, if any, book prizes for excellence in American literature, to say nothing of early American literature.

Apportioning blame is not important since closer investigation might reveal that literary critics cannot be excused from eyeing with envy the wider public audiences to which historians have access. Such scrutiny might entail other embarrassments, too, about how literary critics internalize disciplinary panic so fully as to exact its due from others in the field, especially junior members. More to the point, as White and Drexler argue, history's influence upon early American studies has had salutary effects in staving off canonizing tendencies by encouraging explorations of less strictly recognizable literary materials in ways that have opened up teaching and research to texts by and about women, new-world Africans and African Americans, and Native Americans. However, have these wider ambits left early Americanists detached not only from the theoretical conversations of other periods but also from one another? Does a weak canon make for a weak sense of scholarly identity? The "theory gap" creates a situation in which a community sustained by "complex contestation of variant readings"—that is, a situation in which scholars would substantively engage and discuss the impact of each other's work—has never truly emerged because the demands of the "archival multitude" are such that the intricacies of literary texts, to say nothing of critical readings of those texts, are relevant only insofar as they contribute to understanding historical context. The weak canon that has driven field expansion has also produced professional isolation. Without its *Ulysses* or its *Moby-Dick* (1851), the field of early American literature seems like an office without a water cooler, lacking a space or an occasion to congregate.

Given this state of affairs, theory might make early Americanists feel less vulnerable. By bridging the theoretical disconnect between later periods and early American studies, theory holds out the promise of revealing affiliations between critics of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century literature and their long-lost, less theoretically developed cousins. In proposing such a solution, White and Drexler may be exacerbating the

problem insofar as the problem originates in part from the ability of history as a discipline to set the standards of publication, citation, resource allocation, and professional prestige within early American studies. References to Agamben are not likely to endear apprentices laboring in the workshop of history to the master craftsmen of the guild.

Although historians, in White and Drexler's account, have "extended their practical hegemony over an increasingly textually based scholarship," history has been contested. Moreover, if among early Americanists interdisciplinary horizons and theoretical range are "overdetermined by our (often muted, often repressed) relationship to the field of history," then it is surely important that these contestations have centered on history as a discipline. Think of Nietzsche's impatience with antiquarian history or of Foucault's pitting of genealogy against history. Think of Benjamin's focus on the irruptions—the "chips of Messianic time" (263)—as opposed to the continuities of history or of de Certeau's emphasis on historiography over history.¹ In light of these worries about obsolescence and being out of step with literary studies that bedevil early Americanists, Benedetto Croce's proposition that "every true history is contemporary history" may have special relevance (12). This seeming paradox represents something more than an acknowledgment that contemporary biases shape the writing of history; it also accounts for the hopes as well as anxieties that create interest in the past. Croce writes that history is produced by "spiritual needs" (13), which is not to dematerialize history but to ground our attraction to history in vital and palpable conditions. History "solicits . . . attracts and torments [us], in the same way as the appearance of the adversary, of the loved one, or of the beloved son for whom one trembles" (13–14). In a world where access to the past seems set by the discipline of history and the institutional resources it controls, there may be some meaning beyond mere consolation in saying that the primary impulse to engage history comes from those whose contemporary situation encourages and even demands it. A theory of history after this fashion implies that an early Americanist might turn to seventeenth-century captivity narratives (as Gordon Sayre does in his fine contribution to this special issue), not simply because he or she wants to add more details to a picture that has already been framed by historians, but because he or she needs to make sense of the ways in which dusty texts quicken ethical sensibilities and energize political longings.

This attitude might help early Americanists who otherwise turn away

from self-recrimination only to blame historians. That is, while I agree with White and Drexler in every fiber of my being that has been rejected by historians, I also wonder whether their contribution fires an unnecessary salvo across the unequal trade routes of interdisciplinary exchange between English and history. The point is not whether such a critique is justified, whether it is right or wrong. From where I stand they are right on target. Rather, the question is what is gained by their gambit? White and Drexler counsel an engagement with theory as a means of waking up from the discipline of history, a move they hope will enable Americanists to see themselves as Dupin-like investigators who can overlook, when necessary, the historical clutter of context that can obscure the significance of a text's meaning, circulation, and uses. Poe's detective is distinguished from the literary critic qua CSI specialist, who assembles microscopic pieces of textual evidence to flesh out "the larger event" supposedly brought into view by considering historical context. Does looking at the text as a hidden-in-plain-sight letter inadvertently create a monocular perspective that asks how early American studies can engage the theory-rich terrain of later periods but does not also ask how critics working in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century literature have made both theoretical and historical use of early America?

As indirect descendents of Croce, many scholars have understood early American history as contemporary history. Theories of racialization, nationalism, finance capital, fundamentalism, and the environment often owe their articulation to this sort of backward glance. Ronald Takaki's 1979 book, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, begins with Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush to generate a critical account of race in America as a matter of capitalist development and cultural hegemony. More recently, Ali Behdad in *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (2005) argues that only by studying the ambivalence surrounding Alexander Hamilton and other "foreigners" can we gain full appreciation of how nationalism, as Ernst Renan long ago perceived, requires historical amnesia. As Takaki considers the development of corporate capitalism along the Pacific Rim and as Behdad looks critically at the INS and the border patrol, each vividly shows how early America can become contemporary history. Likewise, Ian Baucom's work on the *Zong* massacre of 1781 creates haunting resonances between the eighteenth-century Atlantic world and contemporary forma-

tions: “Substitute for the chartered company the multinational corporation . . . New York for London, and Wall Street for Exchange Alley, and the cycle of repetitions up to this point is complete” (37). One might adduce similar points about the use of early America in Dana Nelson’s critique of presidentialism, Ian Finseth’s work on the entanglement of the natural environment and notions of racial progress, or Greg Jackson’s study of Puritan homiletics and the development of American realism.

It is perhaps disappointing that none of these authors identify themselves as an early Americanist, much as White and Drexler regret in an endnote that Michael Warner, among others, entered the field of early American studies only to depart for happier and more theoretically sunny climes. However, what would it mean to read Warner’s contemporary histories on sex publics and queer spaces as continuous with early American matters? Such a thought experiment would perhaps inspire conversations about expanding the field, about its relevance to current crises, and about how far continuity might be stretched—or how it might be snapped—in order to perceive new constellations. Perhaps, too, it would help us to see, along with Croce, that the past can and must answer to the present.

NOTES

1. That the discipline of history has not always been receptive to such metahistorical critiques is perhaps suggested by the fact that Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1975) was still drawing fire two decades after its initial publication when Arthur Marwick delivered a controversial lecture entitled “Metahistory Is Bunk—History Is Essential.” For more, see Hayden White, “Response to Arthur Marwick,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995): 233–46.

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