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Conditions of Affection:
Intimacy, Love, and Sex in Queer Studies of Early
America

By

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INTRODUCTION

As the frigid winter months of the infamous encampment at Valley Forge began to slowly fade, a lieutenant faced his final day as a Continental soldier. Little is known about Lieutenant Gotthold Frederick Enslin's life aside from his court martial and subsequent dismissal from the Continental Army in March 1778. This court martial nevertheless stands as a significant point in queer history, for on March 10, 1778, Enslin was found guilty "for attempting to commit *sodomy*, with John Monhor a soldier;" and was condemned "to be drummed out of Camp tomorrow morning [March 11] by all the Drummers and Fifers in the Army never to return."¹ March 11, 1778, saw the first documented soldier to be accused, tried, and found guilty of homosexuality in the US Military dismissed in the most dramatic and humiliating manner of the time.²

This is where Enslin's contribution to queer history begins and ends—with records of his court martial and subsequent very public, very humiliating dismissal from the military. Beyond this, Enslin disappears in the greater historical narrative of forgotten soldiers of the American Revolutionary War. A number of the faceless individuals whose documents preserve only a moment in time- a fate shared by many marginalized individuals of the past, especially those queer individuals who lived before the 20th century. But this fate serves only to supplement a mythos highlighted by George Chauncey about the existence of queer people and historical

¹ Jonathan Katz, "1778: George Washington; The court-martial of Lieutenant Frederick Gotthold Enslin" *Making Gay History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (1976). Pg. 24

² Randy Shilts, "Conduct Unbecoming: Gays & Lesbians in the U.S. Military." (1994). pgs. 11-12

recovery work being done to bring those voices back into the historical narrative.³ Most of these myths are defined specifically to cater to the focus of Chauncey's analysis—New York City from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century—but Chauncey's conclusion for why these myths exist in the first place and why “the prewar gay subculture disappeared from historical memory is that, until recently, nobody looked for it.”⁴ The same can be said about the Revolutionary Period of American History. The records of Enslin's court martial and subsequent dismissal from the military remain some of the very few explicit accounts of queer history in late eighteenth-century America. Though recovery work has been done to uncover these narratives and notions of the past, there remains an extreme lacking in queer history in the late-eighteenth century. The question is how to look for it.

Several complications arise from looking for narratives of marginalized communities in the Revolutionary period. The survival rate of documentation is flimsy, and not all that was written during the Revolution period made it to present-day archives. What's more, the complications of unraveling queer history are much the same as they are when examining any aspect of early American history that strays beyond that of the elite white men. Those who have controlled the historical narrative for so long have made explicit representation of other demographics difficult to find. Historians of the late colonial and early republic periods of American history have been required to read between the lines of existing documentation and focus on the unsaid and implied just as much as what is explicitly written.

³ The myths of internalization, isolation, and invisibility, according to Chauncey state that 1. The internalization of homophobic rhetoric from society led gay men to police themselves instead of embracing their queerness, 2. Homophobic rhetoric in the decades leading up to the gay liberation movement "prevented the development of an extensive gay subculture and forced gay men to lead solitary lives," and 3. That even if there was a “gay world” or thriving queer community, “it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find.” George Chauncey. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. (1994). pgs. 2-3.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 9.

For a field such as queer history, there are further complications in the search for restorative historical narratives. Current terms and labels do not translate well to the late 1700s. The separation between discussions of sex and gender today and the language and understandings of how people viewed, thought about and identified themselves in an era when identifying labels, or lack thereof, were different than they are today creates a barrier that historians must navigate around and contend with. This has led to many historians conducting queer analyses, as well as historians of gender and sexuality, to provide an understandable cautionary disclaimer on terminology, cautioning readers to not jump to conclusions of interpretation dependent on modern definitions of gender, sexuality, and relationships. Perhaps it is not the labels we need to seek, but the trends. In other words, in order to uncover specific historical analysis, it is first necessary to rethink our definitions of modern terms and concepts and recontextualize them with broader definitions. In order to zoom in, we must first zoom out.

METHODOLOGY

Meditations on queer history, representation, and gender and sexuality discourse have always engaged in absolutes and binaries whether or not it is intentional. The obvious figure to point to are the heterosexual/homosexual and male/female binaries that still predominate through discussions of queer history and gender and sexuality studies. This is not to say that no work has been done to question and complicate these binaries, nor that works that do operate within these binaries are fundamentally insignificant. Judith Halberstam has done groundbreaking work and literary analysis that deconstructs masculinity in the context of how it is experienced and portrayed when translated onto a female body. Bell Hooks has called for feminist movements to ensure the inclusivity of trans and BIPOC women in their ideals. Rachel Hope Cleves's research on Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake has shed light on same-sex marriage and lesbian

relationships in early 19th century America. Kathleen Brown and Clair A. Lyons have worked to discuss how gender and sexual presentations in the early American republic were, and remain, heavily dependent on one's class, social standing, and race. However, despite this work, the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries still dominate queer literature and scholarship. This is understandable, as these accounts are often the sources that have easy to point to and discover accounts of quietness. Nobody can say Lieutenant Enslin has no place in queer history. The documents detailing his court martial and the general orders that sent him from Valley Forge in shame are tangible pieces of evidence to which historians can point to maintain his place in the queer historical narrative. Yet this quest for blatant queerness does contribute to the lasting issue of the existence of these binaries in pre-World War II historical research. It also contributes to another problem that has taken hold in queer discussions.

The third binary that dominates the subconscious of historians is the romantic/platonic binary. This framework is not a unique issue to scholarly research. Growing up as a queer individual in the modern world where representation for the LGBTQIA+ community in mainstream media has been lackluster at best, I have seen many ill-informed arguments against allowing men to kiss men on the big screen. One of these arguments is centered around the idea that men should be allowed to just be close friends. Women should be allowed to be close friends. That representation of soft platonic interactions between men is important in the fight against toxic masculinity. And this is correct. Platonic interactions, not just between members of the same gender and sex, but across sexual and gender lines, are just as significant as allowing space for queer, POC, disability, etc. representation. There is no issue in advocating for media to portray platonic friendships. *However*, the "they're just friends/why can't they just be friends"

argument is more often than not only brought up to counter and negate queer interpretations and analyses. *That* is where the issue lies.

This frame of thinking is reflected in scholarly research, especially in historical research that examines pre-1900s history. Historians have been so quick to say that we cannot place modern terminology on people of the past because that's not how they understood themselves while at the same time conducting analyses through frameworks and binaries that are just as modern constructs as the same terminology they warn their readers against using. While this concern over modern concepts and terminology being placed on figures of the past is a valid concern, its overbearing nature has caused many to shy away from the nuances that can and do exist within the broader context of gender and sexuality studies.

One of the most common points of discussion that best exemplifies this in early American history is the relationship between John Laurens and Alexander Hamilton. The popularity of Lin Manuel Miranda's 2016 musical *Hamilton: An American Musical* has brought discussion of the possibly sexual nature of the Hamilton/Laurens relationship to the forefront of the general populous. While it is ill-advised to engage in these discussions with only a fictionalized and stylized account, regardless of how many Tonys it won, it is interesting that this intense conversation occurring in private circles of the general public has not bled into scholarly sectors and academics remain weary to discuss Hamilton and Laurens' relationship much further than acknowledging it exists.

Of the letters that were traded between these two individuals, one, in particular, stands out and has been the subject of analysis for both William Benemann and Sarah Knott. The letter, written by Hamilton in April 1779, is featured in Knott's analysis of sensibility in the Continental Army. She poses the concept as "a means of expressing brotherly friendship" within

the densely homosocial circle and how the notion of sensibility united elite members of the military in this brotherly union.⁵ Benemann examines the relationship through his framework of the romantic friendship. Both historians cite the very same section of the letter, Knott only quoting the one sentence referring to sensibility and Benemann quoting the entire paragraph in full including the editorial note likely left by Hamilton's son John which reads, "I must not publish the whole of this."⁶ Neither of these conflicting uses of the letter is necessarily wrong, despite being used in their vastly different contexts, but they do very accurately depict the tension between romantic interpretations of primary sources and platonic ones.

The truth of the matter is that we will never know for certain whether or not the Laurens/Hamilton relationship was a sexual one. That is the kind of secret that they would have taken to their early graves. But if the lack of substantial surviving evidence does nothing to *prove* a sexual relationship between same-sex pairs, it does nothing to *disprove* it either. Furthermore, even if there was no sexual intimacy or romantic interest, the platonic nature of a relationship does not negate any possibility of queerness. As will be discussed later on in this analysis, the specifics intimate affairs that may or may not have taken place behind closed doors do not necessarily matter when we consider the fact that Laurens and Hamilton shared a mutually affectionate, deep connection that was expressed in ways that editors of their correspondence considered to be too intimate to publish the entirety of.

The larger issue surrounding identity within American culture is that identity has become incredibly centered around who an individual is sexually attracted to. This sense of identity bleeds into one's identity within the LGBTQIA+ community as well. As an individual who

⁵ Sarah Knott, "Sensibility and the American War for Independence" *American Historical Review*, (2004), pg. 31

⁶ William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships*. (2006). pg. 100.

identifies with the genderfluid, bisexual, and asexual communities, I have had the opportunity to be exposed to a variety of discourses surrounding these particular communities. I have seen fellow gender nonconforming people, bisexuals, and asexuals express experiences where they have been told that they're not queer enough, that their identity doesn't exist, that they're just confused, that they "just need to find the right person." As I sit here and type these words, Microsoft Word puts the infamous red squiggly line under the word "asexuals" informing me that the term "asexual" cannot be used in the plural form to refer to a community of people. Aside from this mild, and frankly comparatively insignificant, inconvenience, I am lucky enough to have not personally been outright exposed to these experiences. But they do nonetheless happen and sometimes these hurtful sentiments originate not only from homophobic people but also from within the larger LGBTQIA+ community itself.

Queering early American history with the understanding that queer relationships and identities were not always sexually based does more than just open the door for a greater and more inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. The dichotomy between friendships and romantic interest and relationships need not be pitted against each other. Indeed, working in these binaries only serves to distance historians and scholarship from the true nuance of queer identities. Examining early American history with this understanding opens the door not only for a deeper understanding of gender and sexual power dynamics during the Revolutionary era but also serves to bridge the gap between past vs modern language and vernacular and enriches queer and gender and sexuality studies into the past. Then, as today, some friendships may have indeed been just friendships, but that does not negate any queerness. Our search, as queer historians looking to recover voices of the past long silenced and forgotten, cannot be solely based on obvious displays of sexual attraction and intercourse. Instead, it is necessary to

reexamine our definitions of intimacy and affection and broaden them to account for the multitude of nuanced ways in which people love and express their love for one another.

This work seeks to understand queer history during Revolutionary America through the lens of complicating all three of these binaries. In building on Judith Butler, Kathleen Brown, and Rachel Hope Cleves, in addition to several other scholars of queer and early American history, I seek to understand expressions of affection and intimacy in the late 18th century within its own historical context. "Identity" is here used as it is defined by Lisa Duggan: "a narrative of a subject's location within a social structure" for "as stories rather than mere labels, identities traverse the space between the social world and subjective experience, constituting a central organizing principle connecting self and world."⁷ Here it is a methodology as opposed to a tangible piece of evidence that can be held. Queer is considered in a likewise fashion. The term "queer" for the purposes of this study refers to a rejection of the notion that hetero and homosexuality are stable categories that work twofold. Queer analysis and commentary work "to probe the vast spectrum of conjunctions and interstices that exist between bodies, genders, and desires, as well as how these formations relation to other discourses and institutions" as well as a commitment "to questioning social and cultural norms and resisting 'regimes of the normal' as they apply to both sexuality and to other categories."⁸

I furthermore take from William Benemann's discussion of male intimacy in early America. Three frameworks of male homosocial relationships comprised his analysis. The first, and least relevant to this analysis, is "erotic employment" which refers to a relationship in which

⁷ Lisa Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America," *SIGNS* (1993), pg. 793

⁸ Anne G. Myles, "Queering the Study of Early American Sexuality," *The William and Mary Quarterly* (2003), pg. 200.

one man, typically the younger of the two, is employed by the other. These two men are typically of very different and unequal social statuses.⁹ The second is “romantic mentorship.” Those who engage in romantic mentorships are of significantly different ages. They can also be seen in those of similar ages but of different socioeconomic groups.¹⁰ The third and final framework is “romantic friendships” which Benemann defines as “a close affectionate relationship between two men who were social equals.”¹¹ While Benemann notes that he uses this term with the understanding that these particular relationships may have had a sexual component, but also contends that this framework has been utilized among historians of the 19th century “usually with the implied understanding that the relationship was not sexual (despite the steamy rhetoric of the surviving correspondence).”¹² Benemann’s frameworks of romantic mentorships and romantic friendships, while useful to this analysis, still play into the implication that queer relationships are romantic in nature. I, therefore, alter Benemann’s frameworks to account for platonic queer relationships based on intimacy and affection.

As opposed to looking for sexual labels, acts of intimacy and affection will be read in between the lines, as often must be done for subjects of analysis who have been continuously ignored and removed from surviving documentation. This work will seek to understand the people of the past not as categories but as people who loved and were loved in as many ways as there are colors in the known universe and will do so by examining affection and intimacy as a methodology by which aspects of identity and queerness are, in conjunction with several other factors that have already been discussed by previous scholarship. But in order to recontextualize our understanding of intimacy and affection that deviates from the set societal norms of the late

⁹ Benemann. pgs. xvi-xvii.

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. xvi

¹¹ Ibid. pg. xv

¹² Ibid.

eighteenth century, it is first necessary to examine what it means to use affection and intimacy as a methodology and briefly discuss the general trends of gender and sexuality in the decades leading up to the American Revolutionary War and the founding of the American nation.

AFFECTION AND INTIMACY AS A METHODOLOGY

Despite the justifiable hesitance to place modern labels on figures of the past, a degree of temporal malleability is necessary when researching and reconstructing histories of marginalized voices. While queer individuals as we define and understand them today were not defined and labeled as such in their own historical contexts, it is naive to assume and believe that simply because today's words hadn't yet been coined, people who loved and existed across gender and romantic lines did not exist at all. We must "consider certain intellectual or philosophical continuities that constitute ideological links between" the modern day and the past in our examinations of queer history.¹³ Indeed, this is an inherent facet of queer analysis for if we did not adhere to the fundamental belief that people have always existed as they were, albeit, within their own historical contexts, there would be no motivation to look for and reconstruct queer history. But removing historical figures from their contemporary contexts is the danger in applying modern concepts and terminologies. When discussed in this manner, historical research becomes projections of personal beliefs and thoughts. The question then, that all queer historians face is not "did these people exist?" but rather how to uncover hidden, destroyed, and forgotten narratives.

The answer for most scholars has been to return to the sources and look for hard evidence of non-heteronormative relationships. Rachel Hope Cleves dives into the letters and personal

¹³ Greta LaFleur. "Sex and "Unsex": Histories of Gender Trouble in Eighteenth-Century North America." *Early American Studies*. (2014). pg. 494

documents of Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant and their friends and family to uncover the story of two women who loved each other deeply and were considered to be married in the Early Republic. George Chauncey's groundbreaking work *Gay New York* works uncover the gay world of early 20th century New York by examining terms used by the people of the time within their historical contexts. Judith Halberstam turns to literature to discuss the vastness of masculinity and how it is presented not only in men but in women as well. But most of these works seek to do the same thing: prove beyond reasonable doubt that sexual and/or romantic interest was shared in a particular relationship. Queer history, like all history, is document-based and while evidence is a necessary part of analysis, reading in-between the lines of early American documents to trace and irrefutably prove that two queer individuals were engaging in romantic relationships is, for the most part, unproductive.

Firstly, sexual, and romantic attraction do not define the entirety of the queer experience. Individuals within the asexual and aromantic spectrums, as we refer to these communities today, are people who do not feel romantic or sexual attraction to others. This lack of attraction does not make these individuals any less queer. Indeed, in a society that places so much emphasis and value on sex and romance, the asexual and aromantic communities are inherently fundamentally queer, as they defy the societal and structural norm of Western understandings of partnerships. As these individuals don't feel romantic or sexual attraction at all, or they *do* experience these feelings marginally less than what is considered to be "normal," individuals of the past who felt the same, or similarly, are naturally bound to have left behind fewer, if any, documents pertaining explicitly to positive depictions of sex and romance. To have these two concepts be the only qualifying factors of queer relationships of the past is to ignore and devalue a substantial portion of the queer community.

Secondly, definitions of gayness and same-sex attraction were discussed with a greater degree of nuance before the 20th century. Pre-World War II, queer men were mostly “so labeled only if they displayed a much broader inversion of their ascribed gender status by assuming the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women.”¹⁴ And even within the “gay world” of pre-WWII, as George Chauncey calls it, there was a certain hierarchy of terms that denoted even more specific roles within same-sex sexual encounters. What's more, is that in the eighteenth century the concept of effeminate men who were attracted to other men was considered to be an illegitimate third gender instead of a defined sexual identity.¹⁵ Because notions of queerness, even if sexual encounters and relationships were present, were defined by non-sexual attributes, namely dress and femininity, searching for proof of sexual encounters to define the queer experience in historical records is too narrow an approach to the field of queer history.

The question then is how to construct a queer narrative that is inclusive of all facets of queerness and also accounts for linguistic barriers between modern conceptions and historical understandings and contexts. This work proposes that using examinations of affection and intimacy as they are defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as a methodology through which we understand all relationships, queer and heteronormative, of the past will serve to answer both those questions. The APA defines affection as a “fondness, tenderness, and liking, especially when nonsexual. Feelings of emotional attachment between individuals ... are called affectional bonds ... and their presence is evidenced by proximity-seeking behaviors and mutual distress if loss or involuntary separation occurs.”¹⁶ Intimacy is likewise defined by the APA as “an interpersonal state of extreme emotional closeness such that

¹⁴ Chauncey. pg. 13

¹⁵ LaFleur. pg. 476

¹⁶ American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.apa.org/affection>

each party's personal space can be entered by any of the other parties without causing discomfort ... Intimacy characterizes close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationships and requires the parties to have a detailed knowledge or deep understanding of each other."¹⁷ These definitions, much like the North American colonists' understandings of sex and gender, are not inherently sexual terms but I do engage these concepts with the knowledge and understanding that some relationships that were defined in terms of affection and intimacy may have, and very likely did, have sexual components.

Incorporating the APA's definitions of affection and intimacy into queer theory and scholarship allows for a richer analysis of queer relationships and history despite the language barriers and non-explicitly sexual or romantic anecdotes in surviving documentation. These terms, while not inherently sexual themselves, allow for the consideration of sexual encounters within relationships and therefore does not serve to usurp previous analyses steeped in sex and sexuality that have been done in queer and gender studies. But allowing for a broader scope and understanding of relationships *does* invite historians to understand how people formed and maintained relationships, and which of those relationships were considered unique and special by the standards of the time in which they existed as well as the standards of those involved.

Accepting this notion also allows a method with which historians can begin to tackle the problem of missing and destroyed documentation. Keeping a slightly broader focus on examinations for queer stories allows historians to fill gaps in surviving documents as well as those left behind by documents that were completely destroyed. Blatant statements of sexual encounters and desires are easy to find, and subsequently, just as easy to erase. But acts of

¹⁷ American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.apa.org/intimacy>

intimacy and affection take many forms and are much harder to spot and eradicate. Even though surviving letters and diary entries, understandably so, “rarely include explicit sexual references,” there exists in these same documents “ample evidence [that] shows that the intimacy extended well beyond mere friendship.”¹⁸ Despite the antagonistic manner in which friendship is mentioned, searching for expressions of love that incorporate love in all its forms and not just the romantic highlights the importance of platonic love while maintaining the value of sexual and romantic love in the queer historical narrative of eighteenth-century America.

TRENDS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Throughout colonial American history, the institution of marriage and courtship underwent several meaningful changes, and regulation of both was continuously believed to be, by the general populace, a matter of private affairs. Until 1753, English law considered the private declaration of marriage valid, and “a couple could demonstrate to a court that they were wed merely by showing that they lived together in harmony.”¹⁹ Public ceremony, witnesses, and the exchange of vows were not necessary to be recognized as a married couple. This informal tradition of marriage thrived in colonial America among the general populace, even as church marriage became the respected norm in England and the church’s and court’s refusal to recognize small private ceremonies as signifying a marital union, local communities considered these private declarations of marriage with reverence.²⁰ In addition to the church’s comparative lack of control over sex—especially premarital sex—and sexual relations, by the eighteenth

¹⁸ Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy*, pg. 93

¹⁹ Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, (2002). pg. 126

²⁰ Ibid, pgs. 7, 127. Godbeer continues to explain that part of the reason why informal marriages thrived was due to the lack of available clergy in the colonies. What we consider today to be traditional church ceremonies were unable to be enforced due to the lack of religious control churches had over the populous at large, and indeed these informal marriages, while prevalent across all the colonies, were even more so in areas where clergy was scarce.

century, “courts took less and less interest in the enforcement of moral values [such as sex] as their caseloads became dominated by financial and commercial issues.”²¹ Thus, sexual regulation quickly fell to the private spheres and local communities.

Familial and parental control over courtships and sexual unions were also slackening as the late colonial period wore on. Young adults began to take advantage of the slackening of parental control over sexual exploits and relationships. The result of this was pre-marital sexual experimentation, young couples beginning to choose their partners as opposed to adhering to their parent’s wishes, as well as the rise of casual liaisons and romantic relationships.²² In short, the lack of official control from courts and churches lead sex regulation to be placed in the hands of local communities and families. Sexuality was a part of the private sphere.

Indeed, this informality of marriage is, in part, what allowed for the marriage of Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant. The couple never underwent a traditional marriage with a full public ceremony, but instead “preserved their reputation by persuading their community to treat the matter of their sexuality as an open secret.”²³ Friends and family of the couple alike referred to them in a similar fashion to which they would refer to married, heterosexual couples, and the closed in which Drake and Bryant resided was carefully constructed with an unlocked door with which Drake and Bryant controlled the amount of knowledge that others were exposed to and allowed for the surrounding community to easily ignore and remain ignorant about the rest.²⁴

The functionality of their marriage exactly reflects the structure of a typical informal heterosexual marriage: acknowledged and accepted by the surrounding local community while at

²¹ Ibid. pg. 228.

²² Ibid. pg. 229, 237-38.

²³ Rachel Hope Cleves *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America*. (2014). pg. xii

²⁴ Ibid.

the same time adhering to intimate practices that would shock members of the church. Outside of the institution of marriage, sexuality, in general, was understood in a completely different manner than it is today. The concept of a set sexual and romantic orientation that defines a person's attractions was not introduced until the late nineteenth century and did not properly take hold until the early twentieth century. Instead, North American colonists understood sex, and gender, to be systems within other social and cultural structures, like socioeconomic status and race.²⁵ In other words, early American colonists “gave meaning to sex using categories that were not themselves intrinsically sexual.”²⁶ Understanding that sexual acts were described in non-sexual ways lends itself to a reading of existing and surviving documentation that looks for intimacy and affection first, and actual sexual acts second. Even within non-queer spaces, sex is hardly outright described as such and is instead described in a flowery manner that requires researchers to read in between the lines of surviving documents. It is only natural that we give that same attention to searching for queer relationships of the past as we do heterosexual ones. Nor is the discourse for a gender-neutral pronoun a new topic of discussion. As early as 1770, writers and critics were suggesting various pronouns to be used in a gender-neutral way, with the earliest known, invented gender-neutral pronoun in western culture, *E, es, em*, was coined and suggested in 1841.²⁷

In addition to the discussions being had among writers regarding pronouns with the intent to hide an author's gender, working-class members of American society also popularly

²⁵ Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic*, (2009), pg. 3

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dennis Baron, *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She*, (2020), pgs. 82, 186. In his chronology of gender-neutral pronouns, Baron notes that prior to 1841, already existing pronouns and words had been suggested for use as a gender-neutral pronoun. In 1770, critic Robert Baker, “confused by the similarity of Old English third-person pronouns...mistakenly posit[ed] that *he* was the first gender-neutral pronoun.” Baron. pg. 186

understood gender to be a malleable construct in general. Greta LaFleur points to the popularity of cross-dressing narratives, particularly featuring tales of woman warriors, as an indicator of how the rigidity of the gender binary is a far more recent concept than it is generally believed to be. Masculine women and feminine men “frequently appear as favorite subjects of eighteenth-century satirists [and] are often featured in our primary sources as less disparaged or socially problematic than they do in assessments of them that appear in our scholarship.”²⁸ In addition to satirical works, cross-dressing narratives became extremely popular among the working class with several hundred ballads written and performed at local levels.²⁹ Written cross-dressing narratives include historical accounts like that of Hannah Snell and Deborah Sampson, women who cross-dressed in order to join the military. Neither the ballads nor the accounts of Sampson or Snell depict cross-dressing with negative connotations. Instead, while most of the literature portrays women donning men's clothing to follow a husband or male lover into war or another male homosocial environment, the inherently queer act of cross-dressing is portrayed as a noble and brave act. Among working-class literature, the crossing of gender lines was a commonly understood concept and a popular trope and indeed was a common functional understanding of how gender worked in the late eighteenth century.

Just like the modern conceptions of sexual orientation, the gender binary did not truly take hold until the early nineteenth century. Clair A. Lyons points to the Enlightenment as an explanation for why binaries became so set within the cultural framework of nineteenth-century America. The Enlightenment promoted human agency and challenged the concept of male superiority over women as well as political order. As a reactionary measure attempting to

²⁸ LaFleur. pg. 484

²⁹ For a collection of these narratives, see Wayne State University's "Warrior Women Project". <https://s.wayne.edu/warriorwomen/>.

maintain the “natural order” of gender hierarchy, those in power created a new system of gender hierarchy that was centered around a gender binary. Yet prior to this, “gender was primarily performative, enacted through dress and deportment” and “not understood as essential biological difference.”³⁰ Despite the creation of a binary construct, and the beginnings of cultural anxiety surrounding gender in the eighteenth century, gender and sexuality maintained a level of instability. The ease at which social differences were constructed and manipulated by those who wielded power within social, political, and economic spheres and the growing cultural anxiety regarding gender constructs serve to prove “that gender was, at least to a degree, understood within culture as contingent and constantly at risk of being undermined by this fundamental incoherence.”³¹ After all, there would be no need to attempt to regulate identity if the perceived issue of instability did not exist in the first place. Even those who succumbed to this fear did little to actually punish or correct those whose gender presentation reflected gender’s overall instability.

This brief discussion of gender and sexual trends in the eighteenth century provides the context through which we can discuss queerness in Early America. With sex and gender being as loosely defined and understood by contemporaries of the time we must now examine what exactly defines a queer experience. If definitions of gender and sex were already on shaky foundations to begin with, then searching for non-normative relationships may become more of a complex task than originally perceived. The answer lies in not looking for a defined

³⁰ Clair A Lyons *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (2006) pg. 2, See Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (1990). and Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. (1998). for more on gender performativity.

³¹ LaFleur. pg 482, Jennifer Manion. “Historic Heteroessentialism and Other Orderings in Early America” *SIGNS*, (2009), pgs. 983-984. For further discussion on the instability of identity on the basis of manipulation by those in power, see Kathleen Brown. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*. (1990).

queer history at all and instead looking closely at relationships between people and how and to whom they expressed their affection and shared intimate conversations.

This is not to say that we must do away with the work that has been done to recover queer narratives within historical research. This work was and remains to be, significant in our overall understanding of history. What this *does* mean is that we must alter the way in which we look for and at evidence of queer individuals of the past. We must understand the historical contexts in which they lived and how they thought about themselves and their identities. We must not look for classifications and labels, but rather the subtle ways in which people navigated their daily lives and all that went with it. We cannot count solely on accounts of marriages in early America because the informal nature of marital unity makes it so there simply is no documentation to be found. We must not look only for hard, irrefutable evidence that two individuals were engaging in sexual acts because sexual acts and erotic desires do not define the entirety of the queer experience, and even though sexuality and gender were ill-defined, they were potentially reputation-ruining revelations should they be made public.

It is also significant to note that our conceptions of Early American gender and sexuality stem, for the most part, from the early nineteenth century *after* a significant shift in perceptions surrounding identity had taken place. If we as historians and scholars are meant to be cautious in placing modern conceptions and terms onto figures of the past, we must also be cautious in examining the late eighteenth century with the cultural understanding of the early nineteenth century.

AFFECTION AND INTIMACY IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

Both William Benemann's and Sarah Knott's analyses of Alexander Hamilton's April 1779 letter to John Laurens aren't necessarily wrong for the purposes both authors are utilizing the document for in their respective analyses. But understanding that identity in the eighteenth century was tied very heavily to who could manipulate certain structures and how provides an interesting context for the letter. Knott herself points out that Hamilton was a sensible man because he "attended and refined the powerful sensory perceptions served him by the world."³² In other words, he, a man who desperately sought social and political status, was able to manipulate certain social structures in order to achieve his end goals. Even here the definition of sensibility is just as unstable as concepts of gender and sexuality during the time. A mid-century dictionary defines the term as a quickness of perception and sensation, thereby implying that at the core of sensibility "was a spectrum of meaning from the simple sensations of feeling to the sensory perception from which thought derived."³³ Furthermore, sensibility was for the elite. Sensibility was for the officers of the military, meaning it was inherently tied to one's social status and used by those seeking power.

Benemann, on the other hand, examines the letter through the lens of his discussion of romantic friendships. There is an understanding in these relationships that each partner will eventually get married, and though most do tend to dissipate as they step into their roles as husbands and fathers, attempts at continued intimacy do take place.³⁴ For Hamilton and Laurens, Benemann points to letters written between the pair around the time of Hamilton's marriage to Eliza Schuyler, for evidence of an attempt to maintain their relationship despite his marriage as well as Laurens', which had taken place before the pair met.³⁵ It is hard to say whether or not

³² Knott, pg. 26

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Benemann, pg. xvi

³⁵ Ibid, pg. 100

they would have succeeded as they were never allowed that chance. John Laurens died in a skirmish during the final years of the American Revolution, two years after Hamilton was wed.

As for the letter itself, only the opening paragraph will be examined for the purposes of this analysis as it is the section quoted by Knott and Benemann, and an examination of its entirety requires the devotion of an entire single article. It reads as follows:

Cold in my professions, warm in ⟨my⟩ friendships, I wish, my Dear Laurens, it m(ight) be in my power, by action rather than words, ⟨to⟩ convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that 'till you bade us Adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you. Indeed, my friend, it was not well done. You know the opinion I entertain of mankind, and how much it is my desire to preserve myself free from particular attachments, and to keep my happiness independent on the caprice of others. **You sh⟨ould⟩ not have taken advantage of my sensibility to ste⟨al⟩ into my affections without my consent.** But as you have done it and as we are generally indulgent to those we love, I shall not scruple to pardon the fraud you have committed, on condition that for my sake, if not for your own, you will always continue to merit the partiality, which you have so artfully instilled into ⟨me⟩.³⁶

The bolded lettering, indicating the sentence quoted in Knott's work brings light to two concepts: Knott's sensibility and the notion of affection. The entire document showcases a level of intimacy, Hamilton assuming pieces of personal anecdotes that he expects Laurens is aware of, likely from private, in-person conversations. This particular excerpt depicts an intense longing for physical closeness and a display of emotional closeness. Hamilton freely admits that though he desires to be free of attachments, Laurens seems to be the exception. Not only this, but he openly declares his love for Laurens in the first sentence of this letter and expresses his wish to convince Laurens of its steadfast presence "by action rather than words."³⁷

³⁶ "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.] Bolded lettering added.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

This statement alone can be viewed under both a platonic and romantic lens. The desire not only to show but prove to someone dear that they are loved typically has intense sexual undertones. Yet it is also a sentiment that is shared by parents who love their children. Within the context of the rest of the letter, a very strong argument can be made that Hamilton intended for there to be perceivable sexual undertones and meant his love in a romantic manner. Others might also argue against a romantic inclination, maintaining that friendships are sustained by non-romantic actions and that this is what Hamilton means by his declaration. While those who might engage in this argument are not wrong, friendships, as well as romantic relationships, are maintained by acts of mutual *affection*.

Approaching this excerpt with attention focused on affection and seeking to understand how these two men defined their relationship as opposed to looking for evidence of a platonic or romantic relationship allows us to dig deeper and engage with the nuance of the implied and the things that were not written down. Hamilton references previous conversations about the state of humanity when he writes: “You know the opinion I entertain of mankind.”³⁸ For a man so verbose as Alexander Hamilton, continued extended philosophical discussions of the state of mankind with a loved one is no small sentiment. Indeed, there is a layer of intimacy, whether romantic or platonic, in discussing philosophical viewpoints with others, especially during a time in which these discussions had to occur face-to-face in private, as is indicated here, or over long periods of time while each participant had to take time and care in writing out their thoughts at length.

³⁸ Ibid.

This line also serves to paint the stark contradiction Hamilton is making between his affection, or lack thereof, towards other people and his affection for Laurens, which is depicted in detail as the paragraph continues. Laurens had stolen Hamilton's affection in a way that no other person he has met before has at the time of the conception of this letter.³⁹ This contrast is depicted again at the end of the excerpt when Hamilton assures Laurens that he holds no animosity for him having taken advantage of his sensibility because "we are generally indulgent to those we love" on the condition that Laurens continue to teach Hamilton the values of affection.⁴⁰ This is striking considering the expressed desire to hold people at a distance and again indicates that the relationship Hamilton has with Laurens is not only different than the ones he shares with others but also special and valuable in a way Hamilton had not realized or quite understood before the conception of this letter.

We don't just learn about Hamilton's views of the relationship with this letter either. The fact that Laurens seems to engage with Hamilton in musings on the philosophies of mankind, a sentiment a deeper analysis dedicated to the entire Hamilton/Laurens correspondence would be able to depict with evidence from Laurens' writings on hand as well as Hamilton's, shows that Laurens valued these discussions as much as Hamilton did. Not only did he value these conversations, as the closing lines of this excerpt indicate, but he also engaged with them eagerly, exchanging ideas with Hamilton. Indeed, we can assume from the way Hamilton indicates these undocumented exchanges of philosophy in the 1779 letter that it was during these private discussions that their bond was formed, the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and words

³⁹ Hamilton would not meet his future wife, Eliza, until early 1780, several months after this letter was written.

⁴⁰ "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779]," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

acting as a connecting force by which the foundation of a deep and mutually meaningful relationship was formed.

In an era during which travel between cities and states was not common or easy, bemoaning the distance separating loved ones from each other is frequent in documentation from the Early American period. But this excerpt does more than express regret at the absence of a family member or someone who is just a friend or an acquaintance. The deep longing to be in the same space as one another and the expressions of shared intimacy expressed in the letter indicate that there was a deep connection between Hamilton and Laurens. Although with the knowledge that sex and sexuality were often defined and discussed on non-sexual terms in the eighteenth century, there is a strong argument to be made on sexual innuendos potentially exhibited in the letter, there is no blatant discussion of sex or sexuality in the excerpt. What is very blatant, is Hamilton's love and affection for Laurens as well as the mutual intimacy of their relationship, which served a deeper need than the common understanding of "friendship." This relationship is special, unique, and exceptional and while it is possible that sexual encounters were a part of Hamilton and Laurens' relationship, it is all of these things without *needing* to be sexual.

Queerness for many exists in the subtle and the unsaid. This is especially true in eras during which definitions of sexuality and gender did not have the terms we have today. Hamilton and Laurens' relationship is still queer *despite* the lack of a blatant sexual component and language that any determined and dedicated writer could argue is simply affection among friends with no romantic component and vice versa. Acknowledging that queerness can exist without a blatant record of sexual and romantic components opens the door to discovering what

else is hidden in the intimate space of these relationships. Some might turn up sex and romance, others might not. But all nonetheless remain queer relationships.

Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens were by no means the only ones who experienced exceptional intimacy with fellow Continental soldiers and officers. The construction of Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben's American military family lead to relationships that may or may not have been sexual but undoubtedly uniquely affectionate and intimate by the standards of the men involved. Baron von Steuben, as he later became to be called, was a Prussian soldier who began his military career by serving in the court of King Frederick II.⁴¹ Accusations of "having taken familiarities with young boys" caused Steuben to turn towards the American colonies, where he became an instrumental part of the Continental Army, most famously known for being the one who introduced military drills and order to the rag-tag Continental Army.⁴² The very swift and non-committal manner in which Steuben's biographer, John McAuley Palmer, addresses this accusation is more attention he gives to the relationship between the General and two of his aids-de-camp, Capt. Benjamin Walker, who's barely mentioned in passing, and Capt. William North, who isn't mentioned at all.

Despite this erasure of the two aids from Steuben's narrative, the intimate extensive surviving letters from their correspondence of over 40 years show that the three men considered

⁴¹ Already Steuben's place in queer history takes hold. Frederick II of Prussia was known among Europe's nobility for his homosexuality. While still in power, King Frederick William, Frederick II's father, had Frederick II and his lover, Lieutenant Hans Hermann von Katte, court-martialed. Von Katte was sentenced to death while Frederick II was given a literal get-out-of-jail-free card. Ironically, the valet Frederick William sent to retrieve his son from jail allegedly also became his lover. On top of this, upon taking the throne, Frederick "banished women from his palace and surrounded himself not only with handsome soldiers and pages but also with the greatest cultural figures of his day." Among this all-male crowd were Steuben and Voltaire. Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, pgs. 7-8.

⁴² Steuben's drilling sessions occurred during the encampment of Valley Forge, enshrouding Lieutenant Enslin's dramatic dismissal in some tragic irony. While he was being publicly humiliated for accusations of homosexuality, Steuben was thriving, despite his language barriers, only a few hundred feet away. "From Anonymous to Prince Josef Friederick Wilhelm of Hohenzollern-Hechingen [August 13, 1777]." John McAuley Palmer. *General von Steuben*. (1937). Pg. 92, Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, pg. 11

each other to be significant parts of their lives. From the beginning, the relationship between the three was inherently intimate. Eighteenth-century military families describe the cohort of younger officers who served as aids-de-camp to senior officers. Hamilton and Laurens, for example, being aids for George Washington, were considered members of Washington's military family. Being a member of a "Family" brought with it the prestige associated with the senior officer as well as privileges and immunities, forming networks of younger officers that connected them to the social, political, and military status of their senior officers.⁴³ When Walker and North became Steuben's aids, they became inherently tied to him, so much so that when Steuben was away from the military encampments on business, Walker "considered himself to be the Baron's surrogate whenever they were apart."⁴⁴ Even after his permanent reassignment to Washington's family in 1782, Walker longed for the company of Steuben and especially North, writing: "I was exceedingly glad too to hear that North was again with you—Your situation was too solitary, and wanted his gaiety to make it tolerable—but tell him, that he has another friend besides his General—as he passed on to you he had forgot it."⁴⁵

This small excerpt of the Steuben/Walker/North correspondence exhibits no small amount of intimacy and affection. Coupled with Walker's occasional signature of "Adieu my dear Baron tell North I love him" on his letters, it is apparent that the care Walker had for both Steuben and North goes beyond that of an employee wishing his boss well.⁴⁶ Walker's statement of "Your situation was too solitary, and wanted his gaiety to make it tolerable" reveals a deep understanding of Steuben's temperament as well as highlights Steuben's desire to be in close

⁴³ Benemann. pg. 104

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 105

⁴⁵ "Benjamin Walker to Baron von Steuben, [January 23, 1783]," Steuben Papers NYHS, Ibid. pg. 108

⁴⁶ "Benjamin Walker to Baron von Steuben, [February 19, 1783], Ibid

proximity not only to North, as the subject of this excerpt, but also Walker as well.⁴⁷ In words, affectionate and intimate understandings of a loved one caused Walker to be cognizant of Steuben's need for the proximity of someone with whom he shares an affectional bond. An acknowledgment of North's relationships with Steuben is also reflected in the excerpt. In an off-handed manner, Walker addressed Steuben as *North's* General and the bitter tone in which it is written speaks to Walker's resentment at having been ignored and left out as a result of North's intimate relationship with Steuben, who he was accompanying at the time of the letter's conception.

Walker's own proximity-seeking behaviors are evident in this small excerpt. His plea for North to remember to write him represents the longing he felt for North's company, and expresses his desire to be with North and Steuben during the closing years of the Revolution. The desperate use of Steuben as an intermediary is also evident in Walker's signature on the February 19 letter: "Adieu my dear Baron tell North I love him."⁴⁸ This sendoff by itself is intimate. Though Walker is addressing Steuben by a title, it is not his military rank, which is the customary signature in letters between fellow officers. This casual nature of the signature alludes to not only the mutual affection Steuben and Walker share but also highlights the steps their relationship needed to have taken to allow the informal address. Then there is the request for Steuben to inform North that Walker loves him.

Much like Hamilton's desire to convince Laurens that he loves him, there is little blatant evidence for or against romantic or sexual interest between Walker and North. An all-encompassing analysis of the Walker/North/Steuben correspondence might reveal more evidence

⁴⁷ "Benjamin Walker to Baron von Steuben, [January 23, 1783]," Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Benjamin Walker to Baron von Steuben, [February 19, 1783], Ibid

on that end, but it is doubtful that any of said evidence will absolve the relationship of all ambiguity. Yet the non-sexual declarations of love and shows of affection and intimacy highlight relationships that, regardless of sexual activity, or lack thereof, were considered by those involved to be special and unique. Even after the war had ended and Steuben's military was broken up, the three remained in each other's circles, and "both men still loved and respected their mentor" even if they no longer felt it the same way they once did.⁴⁹ North spent some time in the immediate aftermath of the war living with Steuben and a few other former officers, and even when everyone had moved out, Steuben frequently traveled to visit North and Walker and their new families.⁵⁰

The story of Steuben, Walker, and North ends tragically, as does the story of Hamilton and Laurens. But where Hamilton and Laurens were intimate and affectionate until Laurens' death in 1782, Steuben, Walker, and North grew apart, separated by distance, age, and changes in priorities. Steuben and North died alone, Steuben "unwilling (or unable) to replace" his two younger friends as they grew into husbands and fathers, North being the unfortunate survivor who never quite let go of the affection he longed for and once had until his death in 1836.⁵¹ Walker adjusted to his post-war life, leaving both Steuben and North behind. But again, like Laurens and Hamilton, marriages and lives in heteronormative environments, regardless of how happy they may or may not have been, do not negate the affection and intimacy shared with and between each of these men. Their letters and correspondence, while not depicting any explicit detail of romance or sex, as was typical of eighteenth-century discussions of sexual encounters,

⁴⁹ Benemann. pg. 111

⁵⁰ Ibid. pgs. 110, 112

⁵¹ Ibid, pg. 112

did display extensive amounts of intimate knowledge of each other as well as acts of affection to a degree that would not be uncommon among heterosexual couples.

Another example of queer relationships that are not inherently sexual yet are still nonetheless queer is the concept of Boston Marriages. Though this term was first coined in the nineteenth century by Mark DeWolfe Howe, an editor for the *Atlantic Monthly*, and requires more extensive research regarding its relation to queer studies, gender and sexuality, and intersectional analyses, the early understandings of these relationships were of pairs women who had become financially independent from male relatives and decided to move in with each other. These pairs shared homes, social circles, vacations, and friends, and "were totally involved in one another's lives and devoted to each other."⁵² This is not to say that every individual who engaged in this kind of relationship was necessarily queer. However, the unions, for that is what they were considered by contemporaries, allowed space for AFAB and female-presenting individuals to engage in same-sex relationships, both platonic and romantic, beyond the constraints of heterosexuality. Indeed, these relationships were not considered a threat to the heteronormative American society, for the late nineteenth century was a time in which female sexuality was considered dormant until activated by an AMAB sexual partner. In other words, it was believed that AFAB individuals did not have a sex drive and that these intimate friendships that defined the experience of a Boston Marriage were considered a temporary situation for middle-class white women.⁵³

But if these relationships remained within the boundaries of what was socially acceptable, then how do they fit in with the queer historical narrative and how do we determine

⁵² Esther D. Rothblum, Kathleen A Brehony. *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians*. (1993). pg. 29.

⁵³ *Ibid.* pgs. 29-30.

which of these relationships truly *were* just friends co-habiting for the sake of benefits and those that were something more. It would be necessary to then turn to an examination of the affection and intimacy shared between the partners of these relationships. By conducting a deeper case study dedicated to the analysis of these relationships, an undertaking this project is not suited for, close readings and research into what each member of these relationships considered to be standard on their own terms, not those dictated by the greater society, and what they considered to be unique will serve to unveil relationships that were queer despite the lack of inherent sexual activity. While the named concept of Boston Marriages is a late-nineteenth-century construction, by taking Greta LaFleur's discussion of temporal relativity and understanding that constructs of the present have a foundation in those of the past. While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are very different eras, they do not exist in vacuums completely separate from each other. Boston Marriages may not have been defined as such until the late-nineteenth century, but that knowledge should encourage, rather than dissuade, future works based in the eighteenth century grounded in research from the themes and trends of same-sex relationships among AFAB individuals that carry over between Boston Marriages based on the notions of affection and intimacy.

THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF AFFECTION AND INTIMACY AS A METHODOLOGY

Like all theoretical-based research, the methodology of affection and intimacy is not independent of other methods of analysis, and it is necessary to consider how and where the intersections with theories of feminism, race, class, and gender. One of the ways this search for affection benefits historical research and supplements analyses that fall under these frameworks is that affection is a human need; sex is not. Sex is simply a *condition* of affection or a way in which the human need for affection is sought to be fulfilled. But affection is a basic need, and it

is easier to find in written documents. Intimacy finds its roots in affection for without affection there can be no intimacy. Yet it also takes shape in different forms depending on one's race, class, social status, gender identity, and so on. For men like Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens – white, cisgender, financially independent, educated, well-spoken, and well connected – this intimacy takes the form of philosophical discussions and the exchanges of ideals. But unique acts of affection and intimacy that define a relationship as something deeper than a “just friends” relationship will look different for different people.

We have seen how gender and contemporary feminine sexuality have defined a difference in accepted levels of intimacy between AFAB and female-presenting individuals of the past. These individuals were able to be very physically intimate with each other because of the believed impermanence of feminine same-sex co-habitation and the lack of belief in a female sex drive.⁵⁴ Indeed the language of feminist history has traditionally been inherently sexual in much the same way queer history has. Feminist movements have politicized female sexuality in a manner that is “too steeped in the rhetoric of liberation to make sense in any way that can be inclusive of asexual persons who are simply uninterested in having sex.”⁵⁵ This language, in addition to the growing concern that the generalized use of the term “queer” is desexualizing gay and lesbian studies, is inherently indicative of the problem that studying queer history through the lens of affection and intimacy attempts to solve.

A degree of desexualization is necessary to fully grasp the nuances of feminist and queer histories. This is not to say that historical examinations of sexual practices and displays are unimportant in these fields. It is to say, that despite the importance of sex in these studies, it is

⁵⁴ Rothblum, Brehoney. *Boston Marriages*, pg. 31.

⁵⁵ Karli June Cerankowski, Megan Milks. “New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice.” *Feminist Studies*. (2010). pg. 657.

necessary to remember that there are those who exist within gay, lesbian, and feminist movements who do not experience sex as it is currently discussed both today and within historical scholarship. Indeed, as Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks' discussion of asexuality and asexual studies from a feminist perspective highlights, incorporating an inclusive methodology that accounts for non-sexual accounts allows for a break from the rhetoric of liberation that privileges sex-positive feminism. This framework of analysis also serves to encourage feminist perspectives "to recognize and avoid creating hierarchies of sexual practices."⁵⁶ Pointing to Joan of Arc, whose "anti-sexuality indicated freedom from the inferiority of a female subjectivity," Cerankowski and Milks argue that there is just as much value in non-sexual acts of feminism as there is in celebrations of eroticism.⁵⁷

An inclusive analysis through the lens of affection and intimacy would account for these people as well as allowing for those who do engage in sexual activities for sex is an act of intimacy. What's more, discussing queer history, especially in regards to gender as Greta LaFleur argues, in a manner that unsexes, or at the very least space out scholarly attention to include unsexual customs and practices, allows historians to fully engage in gender and sexual politics of the late eighteenth century in their own right as they were understood and discussed by contemporaries.⁵⁸ Opening up queer, gay, lesbian, and feminist theory to include analyses done through the lens of affection and intimacy does not devalue the work already done in these fields that are based on sexuality. It enriches them.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid pg. 658

⁵⁸ LaFleur notes that being unsexed meant to "relinquish the typical qualities associated with what eighteenth-century speakers would have termed 'the masculine gender' or 'the feminine gender'" and notes that eighteenth-century understanding of unsexing expressed a phobic relationship to qualities of both masculinity and femininity. LaFleur, pg. 498.

Furthermore, learning to understand acts of intimacy as they were regarded by the involved individuals and the societies in which they existed allows historians the ability to break away from Western conceptions of love. In the context of eighteenth-century America, that means working to understand the practices of affection and intimacy throughout the Native American tribes and the cultures of the enslaved African populations. Further analysis dedicated to these communities is necessary, but this work hopes to lay some of the theoretical groundwork upon which those studies can be built. By learning the languages of affection and intimacy within historical and societal contexts, historians are then given a guide with which they can work to decode queer languages and nuances during late eighteenth-century America.

IMPLICATIONS OF AFFECTION AND INTIMACY IN THE PRESENT DAY

The significance of understanding the nuances of sex, gender, and queer studies in late eighteenth-century America is not just of historical and scholastic note. Though this work proposes to utilize the methodology of affection and intimacy to further historians' understandings of eighteenth-century America, it is not an isolated methodology completely separate from other eras of analysis. Quoting feminist theorist Joan Scott's work, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, LaFleur highlights that "the relationship between past and present" should not be "taken for granted but considered a problem to be explored."⁵⁹ Today's gender and sexuality politics have been built from the foundations of gender and sexuality politics of the past, meaning our understanding of queer, gender, and sexuality history has lasting effects on modern society. As has been discussed, affection and intimacy serve to bolster queer studies in pre-World War II historical contexts due to their ability to encourage the historian to understand the

⁵⁹ Ibid. pgs. 498-499.

relationship as it was defined and understood by each partner. But it begs the question of how this change in perspective is relevant to the modern world.

First and foremost, drawing on the importance of affection and intimacy as opposed to simply romance and sex places value on platonic friendships of the past while not devaluing romantic and sexual ones. Regardless of sexual status, the relationships between Hamilton and Laurens, and North, Walker, and Steuben were important to each of the men involved for as long as they were invested in the relationships. This unionizing of platonic and romantic friendships to form a cohesive historical narrative that accounts for all kinds of love has the potential to enrich queer scholarships by being inclusive of those who don't feel romantic or sexual attraction in ways that are deemed the norm by Western culture. This is a useful lesson modern understandings of relationships can and must work to build off of. By prioritizing platonic relationships as much as American society does romantic ones, affection and intimacy have the potential to encourage modern notions of relationships to be inclusive as well, diminishing the stress to find a romantic and sexual partner and also working to nullify the villainization of platonic friendships with constructs such as the "Friend Zone."

Affection and intimacy as a methodology also account for the nuances of love and the standards by which it is defined by individual relationships and the participants of those relationships. With these nuances uncovered, another facet of queer and gender and sexuality studies can begin to take shape in eighteenth-century American scholarship. Queering early American studies must inherently account for smaller acts of intimacy and affection as opposed to solely blatant and explicit acts of romance and sex. Throughout history, and still today, queer individuals have not been afforded the luxury of being able to show their love for each other out in the open, free from fear of persecution and ostracization in as obvious encounters as

heterosexual couples have been. It wasn't until the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas*, which recognized that one's sex life was a private matter, that anti-sodomy laws were made illegal on a federal level. Same-sex marriage wasn't legalized until 12 years later by 2015's *Obergefell v. Hodges*. With the fall of abortion rights in the United States, Supreme Justice Clarence Thomas has threatened to turn the Supreme Court's attention to reversing these rulings as well, claiming that the Court "had a duty to "correct the error" established in those precedents [and] after "overruling these demonstrably erroneous decisions, the question would remain whether other constitutional provisions" protected the rights they established."⁶⁰

The fact of the matter is that "constitutional provisions" will and do not account for sexuality and gender in the ways that we understand them today, because both were considered to be malleable, flexible, and complex structures for both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Marriage was defined by the local community, not the government. Sexual acts were defined by the private sphere. If today's government truly wishes to proceed with the ill-advised desire to embody the legal environment of Early America, it must first understand all levels of the actual society in which it existed, not just the elite. Gender and sexuality were not as strictly defined then as they are now. One needs only to look at the patterns of affection and intimacy within both platonic and romantic relationships in Early America to understand this.

Although his methodology is being proposed with the intent to bolster queer studies, affection and intimacy are not exclusive to queer historical research. Indeed, understanding courtship and relationships as they were discussed within specific historical contexts also serve

⁶⁰ Dan Mangan. "Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas says gay rights, contraception rulings should be reconsidered after Roe is overturned." CNBC. (June 2022). <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/roe-v-wade-supreme-court-justice-thomas-says-gay-rights-rulings-open-to-be-tossed.html>, Sheryl Gay Stolberg. "Thomas's concurring opinion raises questions about what rights might be next." *The New York Times*. (June 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/us/clarence-thomas-roe-griswold-lawrence-obergefell.html>.

to define heteronormative relationships of the past. Unlike labels, which are at times as constraining as they are freeing, acts of affection and intimacy cross gender and sexual lines, uniting people as opposed to sorting them into boxes. As a result, affection, and intimacy, by placing significance on relationships as they were defined by the people involved, may serve to enrich studies of heteronormative relationships and environments. The lasting impact of this kind of research has the potential to challenge modern conceptions of heteronormativity while also shedding a new light on the heterosexually dominated historical narrative.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this discussion is not intended to be an antagonistic put-down of the methods through which Queer History and gender and sexuality studies have been discussed and researched. Indeed, very important scholarship regarding the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, and class in eighteenth-century America has stemmed from and been highlighted by identifying and following patterns of sexual and erotic practices throughout history. There is meaning in sex and sexual relations throughout history, and it must certainly not be ignored as a significant focus of scholarship, however, it cannot be the only way by which historians look for confirmation and validity of relationships, both romantic and platonic. For one, counting on marriage and sex is only productive to a certain point, as marriage was understood on very different terms and existed, in some instances, without official ceremonies and documentation. Sex, similarly, was not discussed in blatantly sexual ways and also excludes those who felt no or little sexual attraction. Furthermore, even when there were records of erotic encounters between members of the same gender and sex, those records are less likely to have survived, destroyed by those like Charity Bryant who wished her documents to be eradicated or by those who wished to

control the historical narrative by erasing marginalized voices from it.⁶¹ But many records of friendships and non-sexual longings for loved ones *do* survive.

Affection and intimacy are inherent in queer existence and analysis. For decades queer people and relationships had to fly under the radar. Small acts of intimacy and affection were, and remain, the primary ways in which queer relationships foster and grow if those relationships were to survive. Blatant acts of sex and declarations of love were, and remain, damning and life-ruining. Blatancy kills. And while looking for evidence of these relationships and the research being done to ensure those voices and stories are heard and told, looking solely for explicit encounters of sex and statements of “I love you” written with clear and inarguable romantic intent is too narrow a focus. Queer relationships often reside in the longing for the affection and pledges of the intimacy of another who is forbidden to the pledger by the heteronormative society these individuals found themselves in.

In addition to being a methodology that incorporates queerness within platonic relationships, affection and intimacy also provide a solution for the challenges inherent in researching pre-World War II and pre-Stonewall history. Without labels and modern terminology, affection and intimacy can acknowledge that the relationships between Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, and Benjamin Walker, William North, and Friedrich von Steuben were, at least for a time, deeper than “just friends.” Utilizing the language each individual used for each other helps to guide historians into understandings of courtship and relationship practices of the time. The broader scope of affection and intimacy allows historians to meet the

⁶¹ Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia*. (2014). pg. xv.

subjects of their analyses where they were at the time in which they lived instead of trying to look for ways in which they can fit into modern constraints and labels.

Affection and intimacy also assist in accounting for the overarching gender and sexuality politics of the times. Married couples of late-eighteenth-century America did not necessarily need marriage certificates and officials to be considered a united couple, making the search for queer unions through official documentation mostly obsolete from the beginning. Even in situations like Lieutenant Enslin, who did have explicit surviving documentation, those documents are sparse in detail. Choosing to focus on the people as they were and analyzing the ways in which they interacted with each other not only compliments and informs analyses of general gender and sexual trends in the overarching politics of the historical era, but also incorporates those who did enter into heteronormative marriages. Hamilton's, Laurens', North's, and Walker's marriages to women do not negate any affection the men felt for each other. Nor does it do anything to erase the intimacy in which they shared.

History often only accounts for the out, the loud, obvious encounters for which there exists indisputable surviving evidence of sexual and romantic interests. In order to fully comprehend the full queer experience in all its vastness, historians must also account for the quiet and the subtle interactions that perhaps were never documented on paper or didn't survive the tests of time if they were looking for affection and intimacy instead of just pure sex allows for the broader community to be seen, not only in surviving documents of the elite discussed here, but also in the working class, the poor, and the enslaved. Affection, not sex, is a human need that we all seek in our own daily lives. In a field of study that focuses so heavily on the stories of people and humanity it is only natural and, indeed, necessary that we look for affection and intimacy in the past as well.

We need not pit romantic and platonic relationships against each other. Not only does it serve to villainize platonic friendships with dangerous concepts like "The Friend Zone" and harm hetero-normative communities just as much as it harms queer ones, but it also robs historians of the chance to engage with a rich variety of experiences and stories. Love, queer love included, exists in many forms and it is negligent and irresponsible to not value all forms of love to the same degree we value sexual and romantic attraction. Love is love and every unique strand is entangled with the others. Romance and sex are intertwined the platonic interactions and non-sexual encounters. Platonic queerness and romantic queerness must exist side-by-side within the restorative historian's quest for inclusivity.

It is very unlikely that we will ever fully grasp how queer individuals showed affection, intimacy, and love to one another. We as historians must become more comfortable in the unknown and the not clearly defined. This is especially true in the turbulent and ever-changing society that was late-eighteenth-century America when gender and sexual norms were yet to be clearly defined. But starting with a general scope that encompasses all forms of love allows for the enrichment of gender and sexuality studies, and understandings of relationships and allows historians to navigate the difficult boundary of modern language vs. historical context. It allows also for a way in which to account for the gaps in surviving documentation, where correspondences and records may have been destroyed either by request of the authors or by editors attempting to censor the personal writings. Explicit sexual encounters are easy to spot and censor, but affection and intimacy, regardless of sexual intent, bleeds through every word. Analyses of sex are important to the study of history, but it is not all-encompassing. There is a time and a place for sexual queer history, but it must go hand in hand with non-sexual queer history as well, not eclipse it.

Attempting to prove one way or the other that individuals of the past belong to specific modern sexual and gender labels and identities is not only impossible but unproductive. Queerness in history requires methods of analysis that account for the ambiguous nature in which some of these individuals lived. Affection and intimacy may not be able to answer all of the questions raised by queer analysis in late eighteenth-century America, nor will such analysis solve discussions and issues of gender and sexuality politics of the past or the present. But this methodology does offer historians a place to start re-examining relationships, what participants value in them, and how queerness exists and has existed in all its multitudes across the expanse of time.