MAX CAVITCH
AND
BRIAN CONNOLLY,
EDITORS

SITUATION CRITICAL

CRITIQUE, THEORY, AND EARLY AMERICAN STUDIES

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Situation Critical

Crisis is a Hair.
—EMILY DICKINSON

LOCATING EARLY AMERICA

"Early America" is neither a specific chronological period nor a discrete geographic region, yet it has been made to stand, in one way or another, for the more or less certain origin point of everything from religious freedom to chattel slavery, settler colonialism, mercantile capitalism, modern democracy, structural racism, economic liberalism, individual sovereignty, national imaginaries, the right to bear arms, disestablishmentarianism, and apple pie. "In the beginning," wrote John Locke, "all the world was *America*."[1] Two centuries later, Max Weber credited New England Puritans with conjuring the "spirit of capitalism" for the global economy.[2] And almost a century after that Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein coined the term *Americanity* to designate nothing less than the newness and novelty of the sixteenth-century modern world-system.[3] The academic field of early American studies, too, is replete with origin stories: the origin of secularism, libertarianism, self-reliance, white supremacism, mass media, or what-you-will.[4] Wherever we look, from the far right to the far left, from the classroom to the polling station, from narrative histories to historical novels, some idea of "early America" is being used as the historical justification of someone's fantasy of what America means today.

The contributors to this volume are less interested in proving or disproving those grounds than in better understanding these fantasies and their effects—effects both intended and unintended. That is, instead of dismissing or discrediting such fantasies, we take seriously Joan Wallach Scott's observation

that, by lending shape to confusion and incoherence, fantasy is precisely what "enables individuals and groups to give themselves histories."[5] In this light, the critical understanding of any historical narrative—including origin stories—depends, in part, upon reconstructing and interpreting the fantasies that inform and motivate it. This is the work, not of mystical divination, but of critical unsettlement: returning to the archives and texts that bear the legible traces of those fantasies and reflecting in a theoretically informed way on the new experiences of confusion and incoherence they produce in and for us.

Critique, in this sense, is not the opposite (and certainly not the enemy) of empirical research but, rather, its accomplice in a wide range of disciplinary efforts to dislodge the experience of the past from the thick sediment of orthodoxy. These efforts are directed less at "correcting" received opinions than at examining the new fantasies that we as "early Americanists" inevitably generate amid the confusion and incoherence of always having to begin again. Thus, each of the volume's contributors, in their own way, begins again with "early America," in order both to interpret current investments in the field and also to offer their own perspective on contemporary debates over the value of critique to historical and literary scholarship as such.

Many narratives of "early America"—from Puritan epics to Revolutionary hagiographies, liberal teleologies, democratic mythologies, and antifoundational counternarratives—get deployed or redirected in order to facilitate or excuse the operations of the nation-state. In response, some scholars resort to a kind of naïve empiricism, returning to the archives to pursue more or less desperate forms of fact-checking, engaging in the back-and-forth of correction and replacement. In contrast, critique directs attention toward the factitious as well as the factual, and toward the ideological as well as the material. The contributors to this volume are skilled researchers as well as seasoned critical thinkers who have done their best to put aside disabling scholarly anxieties about how to "manage" the past, just as they have rejected the fatuous apologetics of so-called postcritique.

Situation Critical is a volume of interanimating chapters that historicize the present of the early American past. Some are concerned with aspects of human subjectivity, such as interiority, belief, and sexuality. Others focus on ontological and epistemological questions regarding freedom, empiricism, truth-value, and racialization. Others are concerned with matters of ethics and representation relating to imperialism, law, and violence. Crucially, they all refrain from making any further efforts to state "definitively" where early America begins and ends, or to arrogate that authority to any particular historical subject or group.

How, then, might this volume be read and used by scholars, students, and other readers with an interest in early America at a time when the word *America* itself has never sounded more like a misnomer? When the concept of an American national identity has never seemed more riven and compromised? When "truthiness" has given way to "alternative facts"? When devotion to the study of the past seems more and more like sheer escapism or a pathological denial of present catastrophes?

Consider, for example, the bitter contentiousness over "The 1619 Project," with its stated aim "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative."[6] "The 1619 Project" initially appeared in the *New York Times* to coincide with the four hundredth anniversary of the twenty or so enslaved and indentured Africans who disembarked at Jamestown in 1619. It was a vital critique of a certain American mythos and its ideological as well as material foundations in white supremacism and chattel slavery. It emphasized the origins of "early America" in the subjection of Black diasporic subjects, while simultaneously offering a vibrant account of the project of radical freedom that emerged from Black liberation struggles. It stands thus far as the most important public intellectual and historical project of the twenty-first century, and reactions to it have ranged from the gracious and enthusiastic reception of a much-needed public reckoning to the visceral rejection of its challenge to white supremacism.

"The 1619 Project" aimed at nothing less than rewriting the origin story of the United States (and the legacies of that origin story), which has structured the nation-state from the eighteenth century to the present day. Its goal was to displace previously enshrined narratives in which the progressive unfolding of democratic freedoms grounded the ostensibly universal ideals of the American Revolution. In their place, it offered a narrative that begins with the "original sin" of chattel slavery and that proceeds with an account of the ongoing reinscription of anti-Black racism into the nation's "DNA"—with consequences for everything from constitutional law to economic policy, social services, infrastructure, and cultural forms. The newspaper venue of "The 1619 Project" and its accessible journalistic survey of recent historical scholarship made it highly visible and widely debated. In 2021 a book version was published, with several new essays and a new subtitle: *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*.[7]

The further deluge of responses to this version of *The 1619 Project* has ranged from the sober and well informed to the tendentious and opportunistic.[8] Indeed, the book has become a major cultural event, highlighting at least three of the most urgent matters at stake in our own volume's ad-

vocacy for more fully critique-driven accounts of early America. First, *The 1619 Project*, for all of its intellectual force, tends to reify early America as a discrete origin point for the subsequent, continuously unfolding history of the United States. One could argue that the sound and fury of the many reactions against *The 1619 Project* stem from its ostensive "violation" of other cherished origin stories. Second, while *The 1619 Project* itself makes clear that it is an interpretive account, many of its fiercest critics have attacked it on the level of facts, as if history consisted only of matters that can be objectively verified. Third, *The 1619 Project* has called into question, in a way that can't be dismissed as "merely academic," the very standards and methodologies of historical research and writing.

The 1619 Project is but one (influential and effective) effort to reframe the origin story and historical shape of early America, produced at the conjunction of the popular and the academic. Critically and reflexively, the present volume pursues a different agenda, one that doesn't hold itself to the illusory standard of consensus.[9] Indeed, any bid for consensus about the past—particularly against the backdrop of a flailing and failing democracy—must allow for the epistemological uncertainty of all such accounts. In his late lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault explores at length the Greek concept of parrhesia, by which Athenian rhetoricians meant speaking the truth freely and boldly—a concept that resonates with the modern injunction to "speak truth to power." Crucially, though, a parrhēsiastes was someone who speaks the truth and also asks forgiveness for doing so. As Foucault observes, "The subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking."[10] Parrhesia is thus a complex relation among three elements, described by Foucault as: "forms of knowledge, studied in terms of their specific modes of veridiction; relations of power, not studied as an emanation of a substantial and invasive power, but in the procedures by which people's conduct is governed; and finally the modes of formation of the subject through practices of self."[11] Foucault argues, in other words, that relations between truth, power, and subjectivity can and should be studied without conflating them. Unfortunately, such reductive conflation is the hallmark of our times, taking forms such as trigger warnings, cancel culture discourse, and state censorship, all of which dangerously seek to make a shibboleth of epistemological certainty.[12]

Critique-driven early American studies can help counter such reductivism and the threats it poses both to the journalistic public sphere and

to academia, where over the past couple of decades three phenomena have perhaps most strongly elicited the panicky response of naïve empiricism: 1) the prodigious digitization of archival materials, now much more widely accessible and instantaneously searchable; 2) the shift to "vast" extranational scales of analysis, broadly challenging the hegemony of the nation-state; and 3) the emergence of ostensibly posthermeneutic or postsymptomatic reading practices, such as "distant reading," "surface reading," "thin description," and "machine reading."[13] As Brian Connolly has argued elsewhere, these three trends have helped foster a troubling "neoempiricism" in the disciplines—history and English—chiefly responsible for scholarship in the field of early American studies.[14] "Troubling," that is, not because the world isn't full of facts and propositions that need to be discovered and processed, but rather because exponents of this recent empirical turn have so often resorted to the minimization, displacement, vilification, and dismissal of critique—as if it had, in Bruno Latour's notorious phrase, "run out of steam."[15]

Critical history, as practiced variously by each of this volume's contributors, addresses some form of a fundamental question: How can our many theoretical orientations continue to be revisited and revised as part of the never-ending study of the relations of knowledge, power, and subjectivity in our pursuit of the past? As Foucault puts it in an interview from the early 1980s, "The game is to try to detect those things which have not yet been talked about, those things that, at the present time, introduce, show, give some more or less vague indications of the fragility of our system of thought, in our way of reflecting, in our practices."[16] And, he might have added, in the very terms we use to talk about them.

Of course, many scholars of early America have been consistently engaged with critique. For decades, scholarship that fits the bill in one way or another has made a deep impact on the field.[17] Yet the broad force of critique has been waning in the humanities—especially, in recent years, under the guise of "postcritique." Moreover, the critical work of early American studies has often been dispersed across numerous subfields, which tends to make the study of critique a secondary or tertiary concern. This volume's chapters work together to recenter critique in early American studies, not least by demonstrating how archives and texts of early America anticipate and invite critical reflection and theorization in relation to numerous salient categories, including: queerness, sexuality, truth, sovereignty, repression, interiority, war, violence, periodization, facts, empiricism—categories of thought and affect through which the past and present call out, as it were, to one another.

Take the affective and propositional term *crisis*, which sets the tone for all the key terms foregrounded in this introduction ("critical," "criticism," "critique"). Indeed, the legacy of critique has been a persistent consciousness of "crisis" for over two hundred years. "Sapere aude!" Kant demanded, punching up the original Horatian motto: "Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!"[18] Kant strikes a rousing note of progress, of possible historical liberation through the public use of reason. But he also slips a real snake into this imagined garden: the critique of reason, which would become, thanks to Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche and Adorno, the ouroboros of immanent critique.

Yet it's hard to tell the story of the future—a future that would depart from the crippled and crippling present—while swallowing your own tail (tale?). It might well be courageous to treat one's own intellectual substance as a source of nourishment, to devour oneself, as it were, in hope of regeneration and renewal. Yet this hope, this desire, this "very particular need," as Nikolas Kompridis puts it, "to begin anew—a need marking one's time as a time of need," is itself nothing new.[19] Indeed, it might be nothing more than a recursive optimism, akin to Enlightenment utopianism or soft messianism—or a defensive mechanism to be mounted against Kompridis's insight. At the same time, though, a "situation critical" is a situation of desire—a situation not only of defense but also of intimacy—or, as Jacques Derrida might put it, of "hospitality,"[20] the hospitality that we, as this volume's editors, proffer at its threshold.

The contemporary mood of irresolvability (Is there a crisis? Is there not? Are we always in crisis?) recalls an exclamatory moment in one of the key works of contemporary critical theory: the widely assimilated imperative—"Always historicize!"—with which Fredric Jameson opens *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Yet this imperative bears within it its own interrogative ethos precisely in its irreconcilable contradiction: historicization tends to move against the temporal frame of "always." It's the essence of critique to challenge all transhistorical claims, including Jameson's deceptively confident claim on critical theory. Nietzsche, after all, called "critique" a "dark question mark,"[21] and efforts at definition remain highly contested. To some extent, perhaps, this is because the joy as well as the anxiety of destruction, of unmaking, harkens back to the infantile—that is, to the shifting but largely undifferentiated fields of libidinal aggression whose archaic traces inform all of our critical efforts, both destructive and emancipatory. All of which is to say that, precisely in its openness and

irresolvability, critique does not and cannot have a single, dominant affect or mood, or a perennial, unquestioned methodology.

For instance, crisis may be apprehended not as an acute, catastrophic scenario, but as the dull immanence of the persistently unbearable. As Emily Dickinson puts it, "Crisis is a Hair"—that is, a hair's breadth, the narrowest of bands, a barely measurable line marking the turning point or zero hour (Walter Benjamin's *Stillstellung*) of quietly impossible decisions, conflicts, or transitions:

> Crisis is a Hair
> Toward which forces creep
> Past which—forces retrograde
> If it come in sleep
>
> To suspend the Breath
> Is the most we can
> Ignorant is it Life or Death
> Nicely balancing—
>
> Let an instant push
> Or an Atom press
> Or a Circle hesitate
> In Circumference
>
> It may jolt the Hand
> That adjusts the Hair
> That secures Eternity
> From presenting—Here—[22]

Some might read this poem as dismissive of worldly conflict and agony (the unspecified "forces" twice referred to in the opening stanza), treating them allegorically as a means of evading responsibility for the here and now. Yet, if the poem's refusal to "historicize" is underscored by the illocal "Here" with which it ends, that doesn't necessarily mean that this deictic punctum seeks maliciously to conceal or obscure the insistent demands of the historical present or culpably to disavow responsibility for making political claims on the present. Indeed, crisis is immanent in every tick of the clock. "Let an instant push," Dickinson recommends. (As if we could do anything but let it!) Yet the poem also suggests that a gesture as simple

as the brush of a hand can, at least temporarily, restore the loose strand to its place in the coif that adorns the pate that encloses the mind that, as Benjamin puts it, meets "every second of time [as] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."[23]

Another early American, Tom Paine, articulated another mode of political messianism in his Revolutionary-era pamphlet series, published between 1776 and 1783 under the collective title *The American Crisis*. "Even calmness," Paine wrote in the final pamphlet (published shortly after the British ratification of the Treaty of Paris),

> has the power of stunning when it opens too instantly upon us. The long and raging hurricane that should cease in a moment, would leave us in a state rather of wonder than enjoyment; and some moments of recollection must pass before we could be capable of tasting the full felicity of repose. There are but few instances, in which the mind is fitted for sudden transitions: it takes in its pleasures by reflection and comparison, and those must have time to act, before the relish for new scenes is complete.[24]

In our own present case—in the critical situation of past, present, and future prospects that call for our contemplation—we worry about the temptation to taste "the felicity of repose" (offered up to a relatively privileged and mobile class of academicians by deterritorialized global capitalism) and the "relish for new scenes" (e.g., scholarly performances that seek to slough off unfashionable and ostensibly deenergized modes of poststructuralist theory). Indeed, as the chapters in this volume attest, the archives and discourses of early America contain, as do the works of Dickinson and Paine, their own critical lexicons and surprising reformulations. Reflecting upon the intertwining of crisis and calmness might very well be "the most we can."

But, if "crisis" is a hair, then what exactly is critique?

One of the most consequential turns in the history of modern thought can be dated to the late eighteenth century and the fitful emergence, in Kant and others, of immanent critique, which more or less coincided with what A. N. Whitehead considered to be the long-overdue "contact" of speculative and practical reason,[25] or what we would now call theoreticism and empiricism. The intellectual trajectories of critique, from the eighteenth century to the present, are most commonly traced in European intellectual history, although, even before the nineteenth-century emergence of a self-consciously "American" tradition of intellectual history, the shaping of these phenomena in early America has been crucial for current thinking about the history of the present.

The historians, literary historians, and critical theorists contributing chapters to this volume all seek to "advance" (as Whitehead would put it) from this empirico-theoretical impasse toward future methodological instars by speculating, in a disciplined way, on the conjunction of the theoretical and the empirical. America, in the broadest sense, continues to figure in the elaboration of immanent critique, while also serving as a site for thinking through the conditions and limits, the blurry and productive edges, of critical thought. We might think here of Susan Buck-Morss's work on Hegel and Haiti;[26] or Paul Downes's work on Hobbes, sovereignty, and early America;[27] or David Kazanjian's study of the theorizations of freedom in letters of the formerly enslaved from Liberia.[28] These works not only draw on various traditions of critique, from the Frankfurt School to deconstruction, but also challenge our sense of the limits of critique—not least, through their ingenious encounters with the archives of early America. For instance, the critical possibilities of ongoing debates over the psychoanalytic postulate of the death drive are reconfigured in the speculative empiricism of nineteenth-century Black epistemology. Freudian repression finds unexpected antecedents in Puritan settler colonialism. And the contours of heteronormativity are figured in radical abolitionist visions of freedom.

As in academia, so too in the world of mass media, the limits of critique are being debated in relation to new forms of pressure on old historical narratives. For example, in a *Washington Post* op-ed denouncing critical race theory, Marc Thiessen, a conservative pundit, recounts an interview he conducted with the historian Allen Guelzo, himself a critic of *The 1619 Project*. Guelzo told Thiessen that "critical race theory is a subset of critical theory that began with Immanuel Kant in the 1790s. It was a response to—and rejection of—the principles of Enlightenment and the Age of Reason on which the American republic was founded. Kant believed that 'reason was inadequate to give shape to our lives' and so he set about 'developing a theory of being critical of reason.'"[29] It should, perhaps, go without saying that Guelzo's claims are inaccurate and foolish, a combination that counts him among the more dangerous intellectual servants of reactionary conservatism. Guelzo's own wild errors here, along with the wider tumult over critical race theory, belie an anxiety not only over the structural conditions of race and racism, but also over the force and trajectories of critique in the present. Kant was indeed aligned with the reification of racial categories even as he opened up the possibility of immanent critique.[30] But the various trajectories of critique since the eighteenth century

cannot be reduced to Kantian epiphenomena. One needn't be concerned with "rescuing" Kant to observe that, even in its periodic alignment with distortions and mythifications, post-Kantian critique continues to have a salutary unsettling force.

This inconvenient truth has led various commentators in academia, as well, to make highly tendentious claims about what critique is and what purposes it serves, claims that often resonate with the doggedly empirical bent of early American studies. Literary critic Rita Felski, for example, has characterized the mindset of critique as one that is "vigilant, wary, mistrustful—that blocks receptivity and inhibits generosity," its operations marked by "an unmistakable blend of suspicion, self-confidence, and indignation."[31] Critics Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have gone so far as to argue that critique now threatens the perspicacity of political analysis: "Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere immediately circulated on the internet; the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication the state's abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as 'mission accomplished.'"[32] Such claims about the transparency of historical meaning are by no means limited to literary scholarship. Historian Gabrielle Spiegel, for example, has claimed that "the linguistic turn" effected "a profound transformation in the nature and understanding of historical work, but in practice and theory . . . we all sense that this profound change has run its course."[33]

The importance of staging fresh encounters between the field's current neoempiricist tendencies and its frequently arrested or submerged elements of critique has been magnified by often clumsy notions of "postcritique" that have been sweeping through the humanities.[34] Some of these notions are patently false, as Julie Orlemanski, among others, has observed: "I know of no critical reader worth engaging who would agree that one's intellectual task is merely to 'draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings,' who would accept 'skepticism as dogma,' or who would recognize her own scholarship as a 'smooth-running machine for registering the limits and insufficiencies of texts' or reading as 'just a diagnostic exercise.'"[35]

But, if many of the most prominent dismissals and caricatures of critique are so distorted and unsound, what has made them so common in the first place? Why have so many humanities scholars turned away from critique at this historical juncture? One explanation focuses on what

Patricia Stuelke calls "the celebrated flight from critique to repair" or "the reparative turn,"[36] an allusion to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential work on paranoid and reparative reading, another touchstone of postcritique. Stuelke notes that "embracing the reparative meant for Sedgwick, as it has often come to mean for the scholars who write in her wake, ceasing to anticipate trouble to come or hunt for evidence of violence the academy already knows or suspects, instead finding joy where one can, honoring practices of survival, finding comfort in contact across temporal and other scales of difference, and celebrating reforms as a win . . . the reparative seems both perpetually avant-garde and eternally ethical in its generous optimism about texts and feelings."[37] Yet it remains a form of repair—of putting back together (hopefully in better condition) already existing systems and forms. But what if the systems and the forms under which we have lived for centuries are irreparable? Early America is one densely configured site of irreparability, and the contours of modern life continue to resonate with it. And yet, as the contributors to this volume demonstrate, so too do alternative possibilities that aim not merely to repair, but to reimagine and even re-shape the world as it might otherwise be.

What the arguments for postcritique seem determined to forget is that, fundamentally, critique is about attending to the present conditions of the production of knowledge—while also acknowledging that we are never simply writing better or worse accounts of the past, but different accounts of the present, as well. As anthropologist Didier Fassin puts it, "Critique is always, at least in part, a response to a certain state of the world being developed within a certain configuration of power and knowledge in the academic and public sphere."[38] Critique cannot become "exhausted," precisely because the historical present is always interrupting its own trajectories and stumbling upon its own possible futures. As legal scholar Allegra McLeod argues, "Critique . . . holds the potential to be a means of working toward that preliminary transcendence or transformation of the status quo by unmasking, deconstructing, laying bare, describing the world carefully in all its awful and mundane violence, and then refusing together the existing understandings of the world as it is and thereby beginning to make it anew."[39] Critical history attends not only to present, past, and future, but also to the ways in which categories of knowledge accrete and impinge on one another as unanticipated futures continue to become new realities. Critique is concerned less with policing disciplinary boundaries than with political and ethical analyses of the present conditions of knowledge production. It's no accident that several of the contributors to this volume

turn their critical energies toward the discourses of fact, documentary, empiricism, and hypocrisy, while others turn to the conditions of the sexual subject and interiority, and still others turn to sovereignty, justice, and violence. For these are conditions of the present, as well as objects of historical inquiry.

This orientation toward critique doesn't map neatly onto discrete disciplinary forms. It requires creative, often unexpected cross-disciplinary attention to the present conditions that shore up these inherited disciplinary forms. For example, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has pointed to the generativity of cross-disciplinary dissensus and to scholarship produced in the "large area of noncoincidence between the aims and desires of literary studies and historical studies."[40] What might our established disciplinary forms look like from new critical perspectives? Or, as Sedgwick asks: "What if the richest junctures were not the ones where *everything means the same thing*?"[41] *Situation Critical* explores what might be at stake in our methodological questions *before* we start attending to disciplinary and methodological borders. Despite what critique's critics claim, the risk of critique, like that of parrhesia, is that it encourages the kind of free speech that precedes the disciplinary expectations that so frequently yield disguised repetitions of "the same." The volume's contributors pursue patient documentary methods, such as bibliography, book history, and legal studies, that are very much in concert with the more speculative operations of critique, the fundamental aim of which is to unsettle received wisdom.

A GENEALOGY OF CRITICAL EARLY AMERICAN STUDIES

In early American studies the epistemological and analytic force of critique has often been muted by the uneasy alliance of history and literature. Thus, it's worth briefly recalling here the history of this relationship and some of the abiding material and intellectual obstacles to the flourishing of critique in the field. Eric Slauter, concerned with the contemporary material consequences (e.g., funding and institutional support, publication, economies of prestige, and state and private-sector sponsorship) for early American studies, has written of "a trade deficit . . . on the side of literary studies" and acknowledges that "the real division may not be between history and literary studies so much as it is between competing concepts within history and within literary studies about what texts are and do."[42] Questions about

the nature of texts and their status as evidence—and as fodder for skirmishes between historians and literary scholars—have been with us for a long time, and they have been exacerbated by the relentless financial degradation of higher education under the aegis of neoliberal austerity. As Rey Chow asks: "What kinds of questions are deemed worthy of funding at a time when resources are dwindling largely because of a historically unprecedented, exponential expansion of the university managerial class, dedicated to entrenching its own indispensability?"[43] How do material circumstances shape the intellectual projects of early American studies? And how do the perceived viability and efficacy of intellectual projects in early American studies further influence the distribution of evaporating material resources?

The intellectual circumstances, and the oft-erected barrier to critique in early American studies, are evident to Slauter, who takes both "literary history and history" to be "historicist enterprises; they are simply committed to historicizing different things."[44] But this historicist premise shouldn't be the uninterrogated ground of the field as such. Are we all historicists simply because we write about the past? Engaging historical narratives—engaging the past in the present—need not be an inherently historicist enterprise. Literary scholars Ed White and Michael Drexler argue that the study of early American literature, broadly speaking, has continued to be "dependent for resources and readers upon a field [History] ostensibly committed to an empirical methodology (however attenuated) and often still relegating theoretical discussions to endnotes," the result of which is that "early American literary critics have often steered clear of nonhistoricist theoretical programs considered too outré by historians and their institutional patrons."[45] While acknowledging Slauter's account of a "trade gap," White and Drexler take issue with his breezy assumption that we're all historicists now, as if all that distinguished the two disciplines were the "different things" they both "historicized." In this regard, one might suggest that the material circumstances of early American studies have created a space for historicist work while marginalizing non- or counterhistoricist work.

Moreover, the early American printed works, manuscripts, and other archival materials studied by members of both disciplines are often the same objects—far more often, indeed, than in fields such as Renaissance studies and Victorian studies, where there has traditionally been a much more clearly demarcated domain of the "literary." Nevertheless, there is nothing about the nature of the early American archive that makes it any less appropriate as a focus of critique. Both within and beyond the field of

early American studies, speculative archival work informed by critical theory keeps challenging the prizing of mimetic representation and ontological realism that are so characteristic of contemporary history writing, with its emphasis on the technocratic mastery of the kind of archival work that is performed chiefly in the service of foregone conclusions.[46] Unfortunately, however, speculative historicisms and alternative historical logics continue largely to be unrewarded, discredited, quarantined within "intellectual history," or exceptionalized as maverick or virtuoso.

Writing history—cultural, economic, geographical, intellectual, literary, military, political, social, subaltern, etc.—requires a commitment to the ineluctably dynamic relation between the empirical and the theoretical. It requires acknowledgment of the persistent tension between the vagaries of language and the vagaries of experience—experience both in and of the past. And it requires training in what Jameson once called the "named theories" and the ethos of critique in order to take, in the words of the Wild On Collective, "non-contiguous, non-proximate arrangements, processes, and forces seriously be they social, symbolic, or psychic structures; fields and relations; or 'causes' that may be separated from 'effects' by continents or centuries." "*Critical* history," they continue, "reflects on its own conditions of social and historical possibility. It specifies the theoretical assumptions, orientations, and implications of its claims," and it "elaborates the worldly stakes of its intervention."[47]

Such "worldly stakes" cannot be dissociated from the disciplinary anxieties and defenses that have long marked even the most sophisticated thinking about the future of the past. Even so, there have been important efforts to introduce alternative logics and to disrupt entrenched disciplinary paradigms. As far back as 1993, for example, the *William and Mary Quarterly* published a forum on "The Future of Early American History," in which ten historians speculated on possible future contours of the field. Their hopes and predictions included: a call for synthesis, against the fragmentation of social history; a synthesis of agrarian history that foreshadowed the new histories of capitalism that have helped animate the discipline in recent years; a call for more work on maritime history, which has been answered by an explosion of circum-Atlantic and other oceanic histories; a call for the renewed study of demography and population, which helped reinvigorate the study of biopolitics; a call for the expansion of African American history in early American studies; and a call for materialist intellectual histories of early America.[48]

This list is striking for its prescience: most of the essays marked out paths through subsequent decades of early American scholarship. However, it is telling that almost half of the contributions spent a significant amount of time contemplating theory, critique, and postmodernism in the context of early American history. Daniel Richter's essay, for example, sounded a warning call against what he perceived as a postmodernist threat, not only to his own investment in Native American studies, but to the entire historical enterprise as he understood it. Richter claimed that historians already knew and put into practice the valuable insights of the "postmodernist enterprise," while insisting that very enterprise was inherently antithetical to the discipline of history.

However, the new genealogies, counterhistories, and narratologies made possible by "postmodernism," which Richter's criticism identified as "hopeless" and "meaningless," were for others a source of new critical energy. Saul Cornell, for example, averred that "historians may find it most useful to consider recent theory in terms of its focus on textuality, discourse, and ideology as categories of analysis," and he sympathetically portrayed "post-structuralism's primary goal: to create the potential for political liberation by decentering, dislocating, and disrupting conventional understandings."[49] Cornell championed a "pragmatic hermeneutics" as a means of "adapting our craft to a postmodern age"—though with no mention of challenging the technocratic foundations of the discipline itself.[50] Kathleen Brown's essay celebrated the proliferation of recent work on women's and gender history that emphasized its points of intersection with contemporary feminist theory.[51] And Michael Meranze's essay drew attention to the importance of not simply conceding the irrecuperability of the past to best-effort approximations but, following figures like Benjamin and Foucault, to develop and practice, as historians, an ethics of historical loss grounded in responsibility for the dead as well as the living.[52]

Obscuring this genealogy has, in part, obscured contrary temporalities that connect the early American past to our ever-vanishing present. Indeed, Meranze's invocation of Benjamin opens up a specific way of rethinking the temporality of early America. "The past can be seized," Benjamin writes, "only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[53] Such a formulation forces a query that connects the present and the past: Why does a particular "image" become visible at a particular "instant"?[54] And what might that mean for conventional historical periodization? Readers may wonder

at the characterization of this volume's focus as "early American studies," since a significant number of the contributions focus squarely on the antebellum United States. This in itself raises issues of both periodization and disciplinarity. "Early America" has tended to be confined to the period prior to the early nineteenth century. To take the chronological purview of leading journals in the field, the *William and Mary Quarterly* considers "the early nineteenth century" to be the end of early America, while *Early American Studies* pushes the limit to 1850, and *Early American Literature* settles on a limit (approximately 1830) more or less between WMQ and EAS.[55] However, in the broad, interdisciplinary field of American studies, which skews toward more contemporary scholarship, anything prior to 1900 tends to be classed as "early." Moreover, in recent decades English literature curricula have tended to push the provisional end of early America closer and closer to 1900. In both scholarly and pedagogical domains, early America has a certain elasticity.

Periodization and temporality occupy the chapters in this volume in at least two ways. First, periodization is always a political strategy. As the medievalist Kathleen Davis writes, periodization is "not simply the drawing of an arbitrary line through time, but a complex process of conceptualizing categories, which are posited as homogenous and retroactively validated by the designation of a period divide."[56] The chapters in this volume push against such linear periodization, making political and ethical claims on the present precisely by interrogating contemporary categories in their early American iterations. Second, because critique refuses to ignore the present, connections to early America emerge in unexpected, potentially unsettling manners. As Nancy Bentley writes elsewhere, "While we may forego the most stringent kinds of critical *disenchantment*, it is possible to reimagine critique as *enchantment*" where "we can discover new dimensions of history not by looking strictly at dominant meaning systems (whether hegemonic or counterhegemonic) but at the unexpected connections that stretch across and athwart those systems."[57]

How does returning to an unexpected early America interrogate the present? And how do the problems and possibilities of contemporary life open up new questions for early Americanists? Political theorist Massimiliano Tomba sees critique as wrapped up with "a specific conception of history and time" and borrows the geological term *subduction* to characterize its "image of history as an overlapping of historical-temporal layers [standing] in opposition to the unilinear image of historical time."[58] This is a helpful way to think of the work of this volume's contributors, which

tracks various concepts, events, ideas, and idioms from early America as they shift the ground of our own disciplinary present—a present constituted by multiple historical-temporal tectonic layers sliding into, over, and under one another.

The work of critique changes its objects of study, which in turn reconfigures the terms and conditions of critique. One trajectory of early American studies has been to deploy narratives that expand its purview with respect to the recovery of marginalized subjects and expansive geographic framing, in order to challenge dominant narratives both academic and popular. But the values of critique also include humility and forbearance. One need only think of the much-ballyhooed "deaths" of the author, the subject, and God. As Leo Bersani puts it, "We can, and should, will ourselves to be less than what we are; an expansive diminishing of being is the activity of a psychic utopia."[59] This, too, is an underlying aim of this volume in relation to the forces that have sustained modernity and secured conventional wisdom about early America.

The modern, normative subject—autonomous, rights-bearing, rational, property-holding, white, male, with a deep interiority marked by sexuality—has been exhaustively critiqued, both on empirical and theoretical grounds. And over the past half-century early American studies has continued to devote more and more energy to cataloging and describing the social lives of counter- or nonnormative subjects, including women, the enslaved, the propertyless, Indigenous peoples, and queer peoples, among others. Yet while this largely descriptive mode of recovery has very substantially challenged the hegemonic structures of the normative modern subject, much critical and theoretical work remains to be done.

Early America is replete with subtle, unexplored interruptions of this dominant narrative and the critical work undertaken in this volume is exemplary. For instance, the psychic defense we now understand, psychoanalytically, as repression was just as central to the seventeenth-century New England Puritans as it is to the post-Freudian subjects of today. This is not merely an empirical fact, but a fact of human subjectivity for which we now have a range of sophisticated theories—from the beginnings of psychoanalysis to contemporary neuroscience—that continue to challenge and find themselves challenged by ever-shifting accounts of early modern psychology. To better understand the articulation of repression in, say, the traces of the uses of Michael Wigglesworth's diary or the poetic self-making of the Puritan Edward Johnson, then and now, is to better

understand the relationship between psychic life, settler colonialism, and the trials of Anglo-Protestant self-scrutiny.

Similarly, the discursive dimensions of sexuality, so frequently studied as part of nineteenth-century Anglo-American subjectivation, have received far less study in histories of early America.[60] For instance, the moral panic over masturbation in the nineteenth-century United States has been much more thoroughly studied than the onanistic discourse of the Great Awakening. And queer subjectivities have yet to be adequately historicized in relation to the textual practices and medical discourses of Puritan self-fashioning. Pre-nineteenth-century Anglo-American subjects developed diverse and sophisticated discourses of sexuality and gender that are impossible to comprehend now if they are quarantined from contemporary critical discourses through which we understand our own psychosexual development.

Of course, the modern subject has been insistently figured as secular, as made possible by the split between the public and the private spheres, a split that often relegated the supposedly nonrational to the precincts of the private—religion, family, emotion, desire. The cultural afterlife of Thomas Paine, as both atheist and as someone deemed a moral hypocrite by others, for instance, works to recalibrate religion and secularism, public and private, insofar as the discourse of moral hypocrisy stems from precisely those dualisms. This kind of critique is not one that empirically proves that a public-private division was not an accurate description of lived experience, but that the public and the private, imbricated in one another, sustained the specific deployment of the secular as a biopolitical regime.

The empirical, the factual, and the documentary are the conditions of the modern regime of truth—a regime that appears increasingly destabilized in our contemporary era of so-called post-truth. However, to attend meaningfully to the empirical, the factual, and the documentary in early America requires attending, as well, to their variability, ideological uses, relations to hierarchies of oppression, and delimitations of freedom—and also, crucially, to their speculative and imaginative possibilities. The imbrication of the descriptive and the interpretive, the empirical and the ideological, has, of course, been accounted for by other scholars. In her history of the modern fact, Mary Poovey has traced the way that "what looks like two distinct functions—describing and interpreting—seem to be different only because one mode of representation (the number) has been graphically separated from another (the narrative commentary)."[61] Or, as Jennifer Morgan has demonstrated, the sciences of numeracy—demography,

accounting, political economy—were entirely wrapped up in the justification of slavery and the delimitation of the human: who could be counted and how they were counted were presented as empirical facts, which, precisely in the figuring of the fact as number, as calculable, delimited the borders of humanity.[62]

Again, the origins of another category, that of the representation of reality, are bound up in the epistemic conditions of early America. To claim that factuality, objectivity, disinterested description, and ideologically neutral empiricism are impossible is not a particularly new claim, but this is not being advanced here to bolster the power of constructivism even if that is a side effect. Rather, a critical attention to them in the context of the specific work they do in early America is particularly revealing and not simply to make us all contingent relativists. The point is not, as so many historians have claimed, that the past is always contingent, that our histories can never be fully objective; rather, it is that that contingency is inherent in the past itself—our present has not broken down, it has recirculated and rearticulated already broken-down categories.

Similarly, modern notions of sovereignty, race, justice, and power emerge in early America and the wider Atlantic and have been figured as unfolding in various ways. Sovereignty increasingly attached to the nation-state system that was worked out in a colonial field; race constituted in the interstices of Atlantic slavery and colonialism becoming the dominant categorical organization of the modern world; justice, increasingly attached to law and the nation; power and violence and periodization not so much an aberration as a constitutive feature. The narrative origins of these ideas are often located in the thickets of early America and the Atlantic world, but, again, these origins, under close critical interrogation, are found to be cracked, unstable foundations. Indeed, critical attention to them diminishes the historical narratives, uncovers subjugated knowledges, and in doing so recovers possibilities for thinking the political, justice, the nation-state, violence, and power otherwise.

To attend to critique and early America, then, is to open the major issues of the present—subjectivity, sexuality, truth, empiricism, justice, sovereignty, violence—in their buried, subjugated forms in early America, and it is in that recursive relationship that critique performs its most trenchant work for early America—a past in the present, the present in a past, as it were. Its urgency inheres in the double move in the present, where staid categories calcify and break apart simultaneously. On a precipice, then, critical early American studies could be said to take the risk of

the parrhēsiast, a risk that inheres in a persistent recourse to the nonfoundational conditions of knowledge and history.

This brings us full circle—if the conditions of early America are figured as always fragmented, never stable, always able to be diminished, then is there, can there be, a crisis now? Especially one with specific bearing on early America? Do the apparent crises of late modernity around race, capitalism, sexuality, or sovereignty relate to the origin narrative in early America? Surely, what gives early America a place in so many conceptualizations of modernity is that its origins narratives are routed through and refracted in the spatiotemporal formation we call early America. But the critical approach advanced in this volume puts crisis itself into question. Do crisis and critique need to be joined? As the anthropologist Janet Roitman puts it, "The point is to observe crisis as a blind spot, and hence to apprehend the ways in which it regulates narrative constructions, the ways in which it allows certain questions to be asked while others are foreclosed."[63] So rather than the close coupling of crisis and critique, perhaps, as demonstrated here, the operations of critique directed at a specific object—early America—demonstrate that our narratives and conceptualizations of contemporary crisis are misplaced. This is not to offer a rosy picture of the present; far from it. Rather, the sense of contemporary crisis relies, as Roitman suggests, on reifying a stable past and not asking questions, or the right questions, of it.

NEW GENEALOGIES

We invite readers to approach this volume as a series of meditations on desire and truth in the writing of early America, and the first two chapters equip the reader for such an approach. Joan W. Scott begins by exploring the relationship between history and psychoanalysis and highlighting the inevitable indeterminacy of historical knowledge shaped by unconscious as well as conscious motivations. In the next chapter, Michael Meranze directs attention to Foucault's late lectures on parrhesia, sovereignty, and the government of the self as critical aids to historical reflection on the relation between truth-telling and power. By foregrounding the work of two of the volume's intellectual touchstones, Freud and Foucault, these two chapters illuminate some of the most important theoretical and critical stakes for the new critical histories of early America toward which the ensuing chapters embark.

Part II attends to the interrelations of desire, truth, sexuality, and interiority in early America, paying particular attention to seventeenth- and

eighteenth-century Puritan and evangelical writings. As Ana Schwartz demonstrates, any discussion of what Perry Miller famously called "the New England Mind" must account for its unconscious as well as conscious dimensions. Indeed, against scholars who argue that these Puritans enjoyed a conscious, emotional freedom, unmarked by repression and the conflicts of the unconscious, Schwartz shows, in a brilliant reading of a poem by Edward Johnson, that repression acted as a defense mechanism against the quotidian struggles and irritations of settler colonialism. Schwartz argues that settler colonialism and its spectacular violence of dispossession are impossible to understand apart from settlers' unconscious struggles with their own internal regimes of psychic displacement and dispossession.

Following Schwartz's exploration of repression, Christopher Looby and Mark J. Miller return to the history of sexuality in the murky period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Looby focuses on the diary of the Puritan minister Michael Wigglesworth, who recorded what may be homoerotic dreams and his experiences of nocturnal emissions in a "secret cipher" as part of the tachygraphy of the diary. Looby excavates a speculative moment in the history of sexuality that situates queerness at the intersection of the secret discourse of the diary, the material textual practices of shorthand, and the medicalizing impulse in Wigglesworth's writings (he consulted with several doctors about his nocturnal emissions). In this, an emergent moment in the history of queer sexuality is evident precisely in the opacity of the diary. As Looby puts it, "With Wigglesworth we are still far short of the historical emergence of the homosexual as a species of person, but we are at least a step beyond an undifferentiated concept of lust that might attach itself to many different objects but was itself one thing only."

Miller similarly takes up questions of sexuality and textual study in his reading of George Whitefield's autobiography and his public efforts to deal with his own masturbation. Whereas Looby attends to the private diary of Wigglesworth and its later, twentieth-century publication history, Miller focuses on the multiple variants of Whitefield's autobiography, which was written for publication, and questions of the relationship between sex, print, and publicity. Whitefield published what was one of the only first-person narratives of masturbation in the emergent transatlantic print public sphere, offering a particularly germinative site for exploring the emergence of sexuality in the evangelical print public sphere.

Part III focuses on early nineteenth-century critiques of veracity, fact, and empiricism, and on the way such discourses structured secularism, family, freedom, and Black speculative life. Indeed, in the context

of emergent secularism and Enlightenment conceptions of reason and freedom, critical histories of this period emphasize the spectacular and speculative, contingent and precarious configurations of fact and belief. As Justine S. Murison shows, emergent secular society was in part configured around hypocrisy as a disconnect between private self and public persona. Attending both to the afterlife of Tom Paine, in which the American Tract Society ventriloquized him as a hypocritical infidel, and to Royal Tyler's 1797 novel *The Algerine Captive*, Murison contends that the cultivation of belief and attempts to verify it follow from disestablishment and the secular organization of privacy. As such, there is a spectacular quality to the efforts to verify real belief that continue to haunt the twenty-first century's obsessions with hypocrisy and moral authenticity. Moreover, as Murison shows, the inherently secular vocations that animate the disciplines of history and English tend to obscure this reading.

Britt Rusert, returning to issues addressed in her book *Fugitive Science*, attends to the "purchase of empiricism . . . for enslaved and nominally free people." Taking her cue from David Walker's use of the term *immaterial*, Rusert traces a deployment of empiricism to speculative ends in Black writing in the nineteenth century, thus critically engaging more conventional uses of the empirical. In doing so, Rusert links the immaterial and the speculative empiricism to a kind of critical nihilism, a questioning of the existence of the world in writings by Walker, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and others, to the death drive. Such an account, linking the speculative and the empirical, limning the boundary between the material and the immaterial, opens a new reading of nineteenth-century epistemologies.

In a similar manner, Jordan Alexander Stein attends to the documentary realism of nineteenth-century abolitionist writing and in doing so uncovers the manner in which the opposite of slavery was not freedom, not contract, not wage labor, but rather the heteronormative family. While the emphasis on the family in antislavery writing is well known, Stein's critique of abolitionist writing here examines the centrality of the "simple referentiality" of antislavery writing, exemplified by Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery as It Is*, and the way it naturalized heteronormativity in an effort to critique slavery. In this figuration, domestic familial life became inevitable and heteronormative gender roles were naturalized.

The final section of this volume attends to the conjunctions of war, violence, and sovereignty to open up entirely new ways, via critique, of conceptualizing possibilities of justice and periodization, of absence and presence. Matthew Crow offers a fresh reading of the tricky and elusive

concept of equity. Equity, which raises the question of where the power to do justice sits in an institutional order, offers a space by which to intervene in liberal accounts of justice and the law. Crow, leaning on Adorno's and Benjamin's work on allegory, turns to the writings of Herman Melville, and in particular, *Moby-Dick*, to excavate a natural history of justice situated in the chasm between the history of law and the history of justice. In doing so, Crow attends to the oceanic conditions of justice in an effort to critically interrogate the human and beyond human aspects of justice. The radical strangeness of equity, in particular its off-kilter temporality, opens up possibilities for rethinking justice itself, borne of Melville's allegories.

This question of time, and in particular of periodization, is of particular concern to John J. Garcia in his critical reading of the Mexican War. Situating it in the context of emergent war reporting and spectacle, Garcia argues that the Mexican War is a vanishing public event, marked by its occlusion and disappearance in historical memory, which furthers the effort of erasing atrocity. In a critical revaluation of periodization itself, Garcia suggests that interbellum, which emphasizes an in-betweenness, is perhaps preferable to the much more common antebellum. However, this is no mere corrective; instead, Garcia merges critical theory and critical bibliography to trace out the different temporality of the war in the writings of soldiers, reporters, and Franklin Pierce that set the war at odds with the time of the nation-state. In doing so, this new effort at periodization, which Garcia reads through Georges Bataille's work on sacrifice, centered the disappeared and reappearing violence of the Mexican War as an extraterritorial refiguring of both early and antebellum America.

NOTES

Epigraph: Emily Dickinson, "Crisis is a Hair," *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 2:934.

1 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 301.

2 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*.

3 Quijano and Wallerstein, "Americanity," 550.

4 See, for example, Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire*; Berkin, *A Sovereign People*; Calloway, *Indian World*; Breen, *The Will of the People*; Fox-Amato, *Exposing Slavery*.

5 Scott, "Fantasy Echo," 51.

6 "1619 Project."

7 Hannah-Jones et al., *1619 Project*.

8 For serious, critical engagements, see Karp, "History as End"; Jackson, "1619 and Public History."

9 Without constraining the meanings of critique, it is worth provisionally noting here that it is worth distinguishing the project of critique from criticism or from being critical. Eric Fassin makes a useful distinction between critique and criticism. As Fassin puts it, "This is what critical thought is about. It is not merely about the denunciation of our opponents' positions, which would only amount to *criticism. Critique* also entails questioning the imposition of the very terms of debate." Fassin, "From Criticism to Critique," 267.

10 Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 11.

11 Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 9.

12 Laws regulating and dictating what can and cannot be taught, laws that have determined that critical accounts of the history of the United States are forms of indoctrination, have emerged in numerous states over the past several years. Nowhere is this more evident than in Florida, exemplified both in the passage of the so-called Stop WOKE Act, as well as new posttenure regulations that include indoctrination and violation of state law, as grounds for dismissal of tenured faculty. For a sampling of how early America is conceptualized, here is former state secretary of education Richard Corcoran and now president of New College: "Instruction on the required topics must be factual and objective and may not suppress or distort significant historical events, such as the Holocaust, and may not define American history as something other than the creation of a new nation based largely on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence." For Corcoran's comments, see "Education Proposal Targets Efforts to 'Indoctrinate,' for the Stop WOKE Act," https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7; for posttenure review, see https://www.flbog.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NoticeofProposedNewRegulation_10.003_Nov2022.pdf.

13 In recent years, the social media hashtag #VastEarlyAmerica has galvanized debate about the advantages and disadvantages of the field's sheer breadth, prompting some to wonder whether the expanding geographical, cultural, linguistic, and chronological scope of early American studies leaves sufficient space for coherent, sufficiently reflexive early American historiographies.

14 Connolly, "Against Accumulation," 172.

15 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

16 Foucault, "What Our Present Is," 137.

17 See, e.g., Bennett, *Colonial Blackness*; Best, *Fugitive's Property*; Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*; Burnham, *Folded Selves*; Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination*; Castronovo, *Propaganda 1776*; Crow, *Thomas Jefferson*; Dillon, *Gender of Freedom*; Drexler and White, *Traumatic Kernel*; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Kazanjian, *Colonizing Trick*; Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*; Rusert, *Fugitive Science*; Schwartz, *Unmoored*; Shapiro, *Culture and Commerce*; Wertheimer, *Underwriting*; White, *Backcountry and City*; and Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free*.

18 Kant, "Answer to the Question," 17.
19 Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure*, 3.
20 Derrida, *Of Hospitality*.
21 Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 155.
22 Dickinson, "Crisis is a Hair," 2:934.
23 Benjamin, "Theses," 264.
24 Paine, "Last Crisis," 348.
25 Whitehead, *Function of Reason*, 34.
26 Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*.
27 Downes, *Hobbes, Sovereignty*.
28 Kazanjian, *Brink of Freedom*.
29 Thiessen, "The Danger of Critical Race Theory."
30 Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom."
31 Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 188.
32 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 2.
33 Spiegel, "Task of the Historian," 3.
34 See Felski, *Limits of Critique*; Anker and Felski, *Critique and Postcritique*; and Castronovo and Glimp, "Introduction: After Critique." Recently, a range of scholars has, in various ways, tried to conceive of new reading practices that would move beyond what they take to be the tired, predictable, and outdated practice of "symptomatic reading" closely associated with Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson. See, for example, Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading:"; and Love, "Close Reading." For skeptical responses, see, for example, Rooney, "Live Free or Describe"; Weed, "Way We Read Now"; and Robbins, "Not So Well Attached."
35 Orlemanski, "A Reader's Love," 9.
36 Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*, 4.
37 Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*, 4.
38 Fassin, "How Is Critique," 14.
39 McLeod, "Law, Critique, and the Undercommons," 255.
40 Dillon, "Atlantic Practices," 208.
41 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6; see also Farred, "'Science Does Not Think,'" 58.
42 Slauter, "History, Literature," 154.
43 Chow, *Face Drawn in Sand*, 8.
44 Slauter, "History, Literature," 154.
45 White and Drexler, "Theory Gap," 472.
46 See, for instance, Connolly and Fuentes, "Introduction"; Helton et al., "Question of Recovery."
47 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 184; Wild On Collective, "Theses on Theory and History."
48 "Forum: The Future of Early American History."
49 Cornell, "Early American History," 329.
50 Cornell, "Early American History," 341.

51 Brown, "Brave New Worlds."

52 Meranze, "Even the Dead Will Not Be Safe." For another influential effort to address the conjunction of theory and early American studies from this period, see St. George, *Possible Pasts*.

53 Benjamin, "Theses," 255.

54 For more on this in the context of early American studies, see Kazanjian, *Colonizing Trick*, 27–34.

55 See the websites for the *William and Mary Quarterly* (https://oieahc.wm.edu/publications/wmq/), *Early American Studies* (https://eas.pennpress.org/home/), and *Early American Literature* (https://uncpress.org/journals/early-american-literature/).

56 Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, 3.

57 Bentley, "Critique as Enchantment," 149. Bentley cites James, *Black Jacobins*, and Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, as examples.

58 Tomba, "Critique as Subduction," 114.

59 Bersani, "I Can Dream," 69.

60 See, for instance, LaFleur, *Natural History of Sexuality*.

61 Poovey, *History of the Modern Fact*, xii.

62 Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*.

63 Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 94.

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