

## Reading Guide – Before the Modern Era: Race, Reproduction, Love, and Intimacy

Human life and experience were shaped by sex, sexuality, and gender long before the modern era. Though our course focuses on the modern period (beginning around 1900), it is useful to learn about what came before -- to consider how the ideas and experiences of early Americans differed from, informed, and helped shape modern understandings of sexual and gender identities.

The readings for this week cover roughly 300 years of history. As this is much too long a period to cover with any depth during a single class period, we will focus our energies on specific themes historians identify as particularly important to the history of gender and sexuality in early America: the bounded nature of sex and reproduction during the colonial era; the connections between race, servitude, and sexual coercion in antebellum America; and the blurring of lines distinguishing friendship, love, and intimacy in the Victorian era.

### Required Texts

- John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, “The Reproductive Matrix, 1600-1800” in *Intimate Matters*, Third Ed. (2012) 3-52.
- Sharon Block, “Lines of Color, Sex, and Service: Comparative Sexual Coercion” in *Early America, in Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, Hodes, ed. (1999) 141-163.
- Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1975) 1-29.
- “Harriet Jacobs Relates Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 1861,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 147-152.
- “Baron Lahontan Describes Love and Marriage Among the Hurons, 1703,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 27-31.
- “John Lawson on Native American Women, North Carolina, 1709,” in *Documenting Intimate Matters: Primary Sources for a History of Sexuality in America*, Foster ed. (2012) 14-18.
- The Letters of Robert Treat Paine and Daniel Webster, in *American Sexual Histories*, second ed., Reiss, ed. (2012) 114-121.

### Questions to Consider:

Jon D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s groundbreaking 1988 book, *Intimate Matters*, was the first to cover the entire history of sexuality in America in a single study. This week you read the first section of the book, which covers the period 1600-1800. What major themes jump out at you as important structuring elements for American thinking about sex and sexuality during this period? Which historical groups or actors to D’Emilio and Freedman think are especially important? As you read, be sure to note anything that you find particularly interesting/surprising/confusing so we can discuss it in class. Read the Lahontan and Lawson primary documents along with D’Emilio and Freedman.

Sharon Block is an historian of early America whose work focuses on the history of rape and sexual coercion. How do class and color shape the experiences of female laborers in her study? What strategies of resistance do the women she studies employ? Why, according to Block, is a *comparative* study of sexual coercion particularly valuable for understanding this era/topic? Read the Jacobs primary source alongside Block.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "Female World of Love and Ritual" is a classic text in women's history and the history of gender and sexuality. How, according to Smith-Rosenberg, did the gendered ideology of the nineteenth century shape (some, middle-class, white) women's relationships with other women? How do ideas about privacy and publicity fit into her story? As you read, keep in mind our conversation from week one. This essay was written in 1975... what kinds of social/cultural/political interventions might Smith-Rosenberg have hoped to make in conducting a study of this nature? Read the Treat-Paine and Webster letters along with this essay.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.110J / 21H.108J Sexual and Gender Identities  
Spring 2016

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.