New World Courtships

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IN AN INTERVIEW ABOUT THE MARRIAGE PLOT (2011), THE US NOVELIST JEFFREY EUGENIDES ADMIRES THE TIGHTLY CONSTRUCTED MARRIAGE PLOTS OF JANE AUSTEN, HENRY JAMES, GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, AND LEO TOLSTOY. IN THE CLASSIC MARRIAGE PLOT, EVENTS ARE ORGANIZED AROUND A SINGLE HEROINE’S SEEMINGLY ORDINARY TASK OF FINDING AND SECURING AN APPROPRIATE HUSBAND. THESE PLOTS PRESENT COMPANIONATE MARRIAGE—that is, marriage based on personal choice and mutual affection—as the heroine’s ultimate reward for the many trials she endures throughout courtship. Rather than dismissing courtship and marriage as quotidian, these plots convey the gravity of a young woman’s decision. The choice of a husband not only determines the heroine’s personal, social, economic, and geographical future, but also publicly marks her attainment of maturity. Her choice, actually limited to a yes or no, is essentially irreversible. Beyond this, though, the choice of an appropriate husband symbolically expresses the heroine’s moral character and worth; in choosing a worthy mate, she proves herself worthy of regard.

“The” Marriage Plot?

Eugenides’s description of the marriage plot will be familiar to readers and scholars of nineteenth-century fiction. Austen, James, and the other writers he mentions have been so influential to the study of the novel that this very particular European marriage plot has come to be “the” marriage plot, canonical beyond measure. Indeed, foundational histories of the novel establish the marriage plot as central to the rise of the novel.¹ Eugenides explains his 2011 novel as a lamentation on “not being able to write a novel with a proper marriage plot because so many social con-
ditions had changed. It was no longer possible to do that.” Although he
believes that it is no longer possible for American writers to use the mar-
riage plot because “we no longer live in a world where marriage is the
end all be all of life and divorce might actually lead you to suicide,” Eu-
genides makes the case that the marriage plot continues to influence our
romantic expectations: “Today . . . it exists in our heads. . . . It still forms
our intentions and expectations, especially romantically.” Whether these
plots are celebratory or critical of the heroine’s quest to find a husband,
in Eugenides’s account, the power of the marriage plot lies precisely in
how it establishes a shared and long-lasting romantic imaginary with
seemingly universal cultural meaning.

*New World Courtships* argues that novelistic representations of court-
ship, marriage, and romantic life from the mid-eighteenth through the
early nineteenth centuries are considerably more diverse than this stand-
ard account suggests. Alongside the canonical marriage plots familiar to
readers of Austen and James are many strange and mostly forgotten tran-
satlantic marriage plots with decidedly non-European scenes of courtship
and marriage ceremonies. These *comparative marriage plots*—plots that
include significant story lines focused on comparing cultural differences
in courtship and marriage practices—offer an alternate vision of what
marriage meant in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and how
it served as a point of encounter between different, diverse cultures. Evi-
dent in Anglophone Atlantic world novels such as *The Female American*
(1767), *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), *Secret History; or, The
Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808), *The Woman of Colour* (1808), and *The
Life and Adventures of Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield M.D.*
(1818), comparative marriage plots demonstrate how novelists around
the time of Austen struggled to represent the diversity of Atlantic world
courtship practices reported in colonial documents, missionary accounts,
and popular volumes of travel literature. I argue that in these novels,
comparative marriage plots undermine monocultural assumptions about
what constitutes or should constitute normative sociopolitical institu-
tions, especially marriage.

I use the phrase *New World* cautiously, but purposefully. The phrase
has been rightly criticized as rhetorically emptying the North American
continent of its extensive and culturally distinct populations of indige-
nous peoples. The Americas were and are populated by diverse groups
of people with long-standing and rapidly evolving marriage traditions.
Many of the courtship and marriage practices outlined in this book were
not “new” to the Americas, although some did arise from the unique rela-
tionships and sexual dynamics that developed among various colonizing
European groups, Native peoples, and enslaved black populations across
several generations of settlement. Instead, I use the phrase *New World* to
indicate the surprising critical insight—the creative possibilities for reimagining courtship and marriage—achieved by the culturally diverse comparative framework deployed by these texts. Whether they support the status quo or imagine new possibilities for arranging sexual relations and family units, the comparative marriage plots traced in this book allow for a moment of reflection and uncertainty. In this way, this study is an exercise in reading against the grain, as it searches for moments when the meanings of marriage across several European metropoles and their colonies are, however briefly, destabilized. *New World Courtships* lingers on such moments of uncertainty and destabilization, which are also the horizon of “new” possibilities.

At the outset, then, it will be useful to review what some historians have called the rise of the conjugal or nuclear family, and with it, the widespread eighteenth-century discursive tradition of the companionate-marriage ideal. As a number of historians and social theorists have argued, in the eighteenth century the desire for a freely chosen marriage based on mutual romantic love transformed generations of previous Western thought on the purpose and function of marriage. Whereas in earlier periods romantic love and sexual passion were not exclusive to or required for marriage and reproduction, Niklas Luhmann argues that the demand for romantic love in marriage led to a remarkable intensifying of heterosexual intimacy. By the end of the eighteenth century, individual choice replaced parentally arranged marriage as a new social ideal among the upwardly mobile gentry. While actual social practices did not necessarily align with this ideal, there was a growing sense that affection ought to be the proper basis for marriage.

This shift toward affectionate, romantic marriage necessitated a new and elaborate culture of courtship including chaperoned and unchaperoned visits, carriage rides, outings, and the presentation of gifts. These courtship rituals can be seen in the nascent novel, increasing the likelihood that readers would incorporate these practices in their own courtships. As young people increasingly chose their own marriage partners, so too did they see the time before marriage as a necessary period for assessing the suitable qualities of and compatibility with a future mate.

The adoption of romantic love as a social ideal occurred at different rates in various populations. Edmund Leites describes a new emphasis on emotional companionship in seventeenth-century Puritan discourse
on marriage, a shift from previous classical rhetoric on the virtues of same-sex friendships. Even as sexual attraction and compatibility were recognized as beneficial to Puritan marriages, they were not (yet) considered an adequate basis for establishing marriage. In *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England*, Lawrence Stone argues that an intensive restructuring of the English family occurred across the long eighteenth century. Stone tracks what he calls the transition from the restricted patriarchal family with its authoritarian family relationships and large households, which might include grandparents, extended family, and servants, to the closed nuclear family with its more intimate relationships and greatly reduced household. The nuclear family, as Stone describes it, was more private and withdrawn from the community, less dependent on kin, and more affectionate. Stone’s thesis largely draws on evidence from an emerging bourgeois literary print culture, and so it cannot accurately describe social conditions on the ground or show the nuances of class differences in family structures. Although Stone’s work has been criticized for, among other things, describing companionate marriage as normative before it in fact becomes a mainstream practice, I find the term *companionate marriage* useful to describe a social *ideal* within a discursive tradition of novels and conduct books targeted at Anglophone women readers.

In describing the shifting attitudes toward marriage as “yoke mates to soul mates,” Stephanie Coontz outlines two significant social changes that enable the rise of companionate marriage: the shift to wage labor that made young people less dependent on land or parentally controlled inheritances and new Enlightenment ideas such as the right of the individual to pursue happiness. This Enlightenment emphasis on the individual and contractual nature of marriage has been traced back to the political reformulation of the Glorious Revolution, when the relation between the monarch and his subjects was renegotiated as a voluntary agreement.

The slow transition during the course of the eighteenth century from previous domestic economies, where men and women labored in the home to produce trade goods and household necessities, to wage labor outside the home led not only to a historically new phenomenon, the male breadwinner marriage, but also to an increase in the belief that men and women ought properly to operate in separate spheres. By the nineteenth century, this line of thinking divided humanity into two gender-based categories with supposedly inherently distinct traits. The male sphere was active, rational, and engaged in public life, while the fe-
male sphere was compassionate, domestic, and private. The complemen-
tary coming together of the two spheres in heterosexual marriage was
tought to produce a well-rounded and whole family. Jürgen Habermas
theorizes this two-spheres phenomenon by arguing that the develop-
ment of an intimate private sphere of the family in the eighteenth cen-
tury made possible the development of a rational public sphere. Thus,
the privacy of the family—specifically the bourgeois nuclear family
emerging from a freely chosen and mutually affectionate companion-
ate marriage—is, for Habermas, the seedbed of personal and political
freedom.\footnote{11}

What is crucial in this study is how novels in this period proclaim An-
glophone women’s new ability to contract affection-based marriages as a
signifier of freedom, specifically translating personal marital choice into
nationalist claims for British superiority. Surprisingly, these period claims
have been recirculated by well-meaning historians and literary scholars.
For instance, Stone claims that companionate marriage benefited women
and led to more equal marital relations, while Ian Watt describes the rise
of the novel as “connected with the much greater freedom of women in
modern society, a freedom which, especially as regards marriage, was
achieved earlier and more completely in England than elsewhere.”\footnote{12}
Because the marriage plot has traditionally been understood to express the
ideological norms and values of a particular nation, Judith Roof argues
that canonical Euro-American marriage plots establish “an irresistible
merger of family and state.”\footnote{13} However, the comparative marriage plots
studied in this book specifically compare other cultural systems and pri-
orities for making marriages in the Americas alongside the emerging
British companionate-marriage ideal, often with the effect of unsettling
the normative “merger of family and state” found in canonical marriage
plots. For instance, in chapter 2 I trace how Frances Brooke compares
Wendat (Huron) and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women’s political rights
and systems of arranged marriage with the much-touted freedom British
women had to choose spouses in \textit{The History of Emily Montague}, while
in chapter 3 I turn to Leonora Sansay’s interest in contractual nonmar-
ital sexual relations in the Caribbean in \textit{Secret History}, especially the
relationship between white planters and black and biracial \textit{ménagères}
(housekeepers), which regularly included both domestic and sexual ser-
vices. These writers’ comparative marriage plots make it possible to rec-
ognize that sex and marriage have not always and everywhere been pri-
vate or irreversible relations.

The comparative lens employed by novels such as \textit{The History of
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Emily Montague and Secret History, among others, suggests that one of the reasons these texts have been so long ignored is precisely that they do not easily align with the focus on the nation that is arguably still central to literary studies. However, recent turns toward Atlantic and transnational studies allow literary scholars to reassess the privileged position of the nation and the literary critical emphasis on national literatures.\(^{14}\) My comparative practice is rooted in what Susan Stanford Friedman calls “locational” feminism, a strategy that demands both an immersion in particular cultural contexts and attention to the ways that local practices are bound up in national and transnational geopolitics and their discourses.\(^ {15}\) In New World Courtships, comparison is more than a methodology. The long history that lies behind my methodology itself becomes an object of study as I consider the ways that Enlightenment novelists themselves engage in a comparative methodology to establish and critique evolving ideals of marriage. Theorizing about the function of comparing marriage practices in Anglo-imperial Atlantic novels offers a more complex picture of the ideological work of romance in the processes of colonial governance and in the history of the novel. This book describes how and why Atlantic world differences in courtship traditions and novels about those various traditions have mattered since the eighteenth century.

A Novel History of Companionate Marriage

As Shulamith Firestone observes in her radical feminist treatise, “Love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women’s oppression today. . . . The panic felt at any threat to love is a good clue to its political significance.”\(^ {16}\) Although Firestone has been rightly criticized for an essentialist view of sex difference that is at odds with her Marxist dialectical framework, her critique of the negative effects of romantic love as it exists in patriarchy remains compelling. She argues, “It is not the process of love itself that is at fault, but its political, i.e., unequal power context” that makes it destructive; however, as it currently exists in this unequal power relation, “romanticism is a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their conditions.”\(^ {17}\) More recently, Anna Jónasdóttir observes that “love work” is unevenly distributed between partners in heterosexual marriages, and that “men tend to exploit women’s capacities for love and transform these into individual and collective modes of power over which women lose control.”\(^ {18}\) This book follows in this tradition of feminist debates about women’s agency and investments
in romance and romance narratives. It, too, is concerned with how novels promote certain romantic relations as normative and whether those relations are good for women.

While feminist literary critics have long recognized the ways that the novel’s insistence on the marriage plot has shaped women’s lives, they have largely traced these effects through a historically and culturally specific British and Anglo-American companionate-marriage paradigm. Studies by Joseph Allen Boone, Nancy Armstrong, and others demonstrate how the courtship plot’s inevitable conclusion in marriage conservatively maintains the status quo and restricts women’s possibilities. For instance, Boone argues that “the movement toward stasis in the canonical love-plot, be the resolution comic or tragic, functioned to preclude, by repressing from the audience’s overt consciousness, any serious dismantling of the social order.” Of course, the reigning social order both inside and outside the fictional space of the love story is defined by hierarchical gender patterns and assumptions, which Armstrong controversially argues take precedence in the nineteenth century over previously dominant social issues such as class difference. These and other important critiques of the romance tradition trace the conservative ideological content in hegemonic romance culture, but they tell only part of the story. In contrast to the conservative nature of many marriage plots, Anne DuCille insists that nineteenth-century African American women writers use the marriage plot as a means of achieving respectability so that the heroine can go on to accomplish meaningful racial uplift projects in her community. Although the novels in DuCille’s study are not comparative in the ways that I outline, these texts demonstrate how nineteenth-century African American women’s marriage plots did not prevent women from participating in the public sphere. By telling a different story, DuCille highlights the ways that the field of feminist literary studies itself shaped “the” marriage plot.

This study seeks to widen the scope of feminist analyses of fictional marriage narratives by attending to novels with a comparative focus on Atlantic marriage practices. One of the central claims this book makes is that Anglophone novels with comparative marriage plots frequently unsettle Enlightenment hierarchies of human progress in ways that cultural comparisons in other genres do not. That is, comparisons of various marriage traditions and gender practices in the Americas operate differently in fiction. This book traces those differences as they unfold in settings as various as Great Britain, colonial Virginia, lower Canada, Haiti, Jamaica, and newly independent Pennsylvania. This range of geopolitical contexts not only enriches our understanding of gender and marriage relations in
Feminist literary critics have rigorously outlined the narrative mechanics of marriage plots and their ideological content in their attempts to explain why marriage plots prove so satisfying to readers. In Writing beyond the Ending, Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that the discovery of mutual love that drives the plot of so many early novels leads to one of two inevitable endings for a woman in love: marriage or death. Of these two conclusions, marriage offers the positive social recognition that women are taught to desire; marriage means social stability and the attainment of adulthood. Moreover, these canonical plots conclude at the altar. Readers have little interest in the couple’s quotidian married life. Here, marriage is a woman’s story. Rachel Brownstein describes the heroine’s propulsion toward marriage as securing “an achieved, finished identity.” The appeal of this plot, Brownstein notes, is “the tantalizing, misleading illusion of the self perfected through a resolution of the female destiny—by the idea of becoming a heroine. . . . Young women like to read about heroines in fiction so as to rehearse possible lives and to imagine a woman’s life as important—because they want to be attractive and powerful and significant, someone whose life is worth writing about, whose world revolves around her and makes being the way she is make sense.” Like Eugenides in the opening example, both DuPlessis and Brownstein note the powerful ideological hold that canonical marriage plots have on women readers and later generations of writers.

For DuPlessis, the rigid conformity to the two conclusions of female protagonists’ stories in nineteenth-century fiction becomes a challenge that later twentieth-century writers such as Virginia Woolf, H.D., and others will purposefully revise and write “beyond.” One of the surprising discoveries of working with previously overlooked comparative marriage plots such as the story of a biracial Jamaican woman in The Woman of Colour (1808) is how a century before DuPlessis marks the trend in white Anglophone women writers, the anonymous author of The Woman of Colour turns to the solution of writing beyond the ending to critique the limitations of the British marriage plot. In chapter 5 I argue that the author moves beyond marriage to purposefully revise the possibilities for biracial colonized women such as Olivia Fairfield. In these and other examples, I trace how in contrast to the eighteenth-century discourse of women’s marital freedom, comparative marriage plots allow for a critical awareness of the narrow options women are granted within the canon-
ical marriage plot and within the sociopolitical life of the Anglophone Atlantic world. Although the comparative plots explored in this book are not easy multicultural celebrations of difference, the comparative lens they deploy makes visible how the marriage norms of the British Atlantic world and the narratives about those norms are only one of a range of options for making marriage.

One facet of feminist debates about the conservative or progressive nature of romance narratives has centered on the ways that traditional marriage plots trap women in the private sphere. More recent studies by Helen Thompson and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon use courtship novels as a site for questioning the supposed division between private romantic relationships and public political agency. For instance, Thompson asks if feminist scholars may be limiting what counts as recognizable female agency by focusing exclusively on acts of resistance. She argues that many British heroines’ acts of compliance with patriarchal demands actually render patriarchy visible, showing readers the absurdities of female passivity. In the early American context, Dillon demonstrates how marriage is a tool for ratifying citizen-subjects and instantiating the division of gendered private and public spheres, rather than reflecting preexisting separate spheres. Both Thompson and Dillon offer significant and sophisticated readings of the ideological function of marriage in the emergence of liberal political institutions in Britain and the United States; however, both these accounts exist within the monocultural logic of British and Anglo-American marriage traditions. The Americas, and texts written about the Americas, contain many different marriage traditions—including traditions that fundamentally threaten the primacy of the patriarchal companionate-marriage ideal.

This book turns to an Atlantic world model of marriage comparison in order to extend the geographic borders as well as the cultural and racial delimiters of “the” marriage plot. The comparative elements in these marriage plots decenter the primacy of monogamous heterosexual couples and their romantic attachments in favor of other relationships, duties, and life choices. These plots make room for questions about whether companionate marriages are actually more progressive than other styles of marriage and whether marriage should be the ultimate aspiration, especially for women. The texts featured in *New World Courtships* do not abandon their romantic ideals or colonizing hierarchical schemas for evaluating others; yet, in the moment of comparison, what seems natural and inevitable about marriage becomes recognizable as simply one among many structuring systems for organizing sex, marriage, and
families, and their relationships to the state and/or empire. This moment of comparison leads, too, to the critical insight that patriarchal marriage systems could change. This book attends to the ways that Anglophone novelists in the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries repeatedly describe a shift in conceptualizing romance after encountering marital diversity in the circum-Atlantic world.

Representing Marital Diversity in the Anglophone Novel

In the established canon of transatlantic novels, there are already obvious resources for exploring representations of Atlantic world marital diversity. In *Oroonoko* (1688), for instance, Aphra Behn is keenly aware of the challenges slavery poses to marriage. However, her novel is not comparative in the same manner as the novels I study, which integrate on-the-ground comparisons of actual local marriage practices into their plots in order to consider and question companionate-based British marriage relations. The tragedy of *Oroonoko* is that slavery disrupts the royal Oroonoko’s patriarchal marriage rights, not that such rights exist. Ultimately, Behn is not particularly invested in the ways that the system of slavery alters marriage relations and gender expectations in the Americas.27

Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) is another familiar text where colonial marriage figures prominently. However, Defoe is not interested in the diversity of colonial American marriage practices, nor in comparing those traditions. He does not attempt to represent the complexities of competing indigenous, European-imported, or Creole legal, religious, and social practices in the Americas. Rather than documenting the productive messiness of Atlantic world marriages, *Moll Flanders* renders colonial marriage relations profoundly unnatural with its memorable Virginia-based incest plot. In doing so, it ushers in a whole strain of novels from Edgeworth’s *Belinda* to Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* that characterize romantic entanglements in the Americas as a threat to proper British marital alliances.28

In contrast to *Moll Flanders* and *Oroonoko*, the comparative plots taken up by *New World Courtships* portray marital diversity in the Atlantic world as sources of possibility. They openly reflect on the merits of organizing marriage and family relations differently. While not necessarily critical of normative companionate-marriage expectations, these texts recognize and validate the existence of other cultural systems for making marriage.
Lydia Maria Child’s 1824 historical novel *Hobomok* is perhaps the best-known example of what I am calling a comparative marriage plot, although it has not generally been recognized as such. The first publication in Child’s long writing career, *Hobomok* draws on colonial-era primary source materials to represent richly detailed and culturally distinct seventeenth-century Puritan and Native fictional worlds. The novel follows Mary Conant, the daughter of a stern Puritan immigrant, as she evaluates her romantic options. After Mary’s inflexible father rejects her favorite suitor, Charles Brown, because of his Anglicanism, Brown leaves the colony and reportedly dies at sea. Devastated by the news and, perhaps, rebelling against her father’s oppressive patriarchal authority, Mary marries Hobomok, a Wampanoag friend and ally of the Puritans. Mary lives with Hobomok and raises her biracial child in the Wampanoag village until Charles Brown returns. Upon seeing Brown, Hobomok immediately sacrifices his family, grants Mary a divorce, and leaves the village, never questioning that this is what she would want in her heart. After Hobomok’s sudden departure, Mary freely marries Brown and assimilates her biracial child into colonial culture.

*Hobomok*’s treatment of interracial marriage and miscegenation has received considerable scholarly attention. Many scholars acknowledge Child’s progressive political sensibilities and champion her feminist revisions to the frontier romance genre, often characterizing the novel as a protofeminist response to James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. But they are brought up short by the way that *Hobomok*’s conclusion participates in racist nineteenth-century “vanishing Indian” rhetoric. They are right to note this and to be troubled by it. Child does make Hobomok sacrifice his love and abandon his family so that his white wife can marry her “true” (white) love and assimilate her child into white colonial culture. She does, ultimately, validate the white companionate couple and American manifest destiny. What, then, does her comparison of Mary’s suitors accomplish?

By juxtaposing Mary’s plausible romantic options, Child uses a comparative marriage plot to question and critique patriarchal marital regulations in the novel’s seventeenth-century colonial setting as well as in Child’s own nineteenth-century period. During the course of the novel, she presents Native marriage practices as a logical and valid system with its own cultural integrity, infusing her depictions of Wampanoag peoples with as much primary-source-derived historical detail as she gives to her Puritan characters. What’s more, she suggests that Native marriage traditions may, in fact, be more progressive and accommodating than
Anglo-American marriage practices in either the seventeenth or the nineteenth century. This is not to say that Child’s depictions are either historically accurate or politically correct—this is still a nineteenth-century historical novel with a notable “vanishing” agenda. Nevertheless, Child textures the lives of her Native characters with the kind of ethnographically rich, quotidian detail that Mark Rifkin identifies in contemporary Native writing as a strategy of simultaneously remembering tradition and resisting US governance. In short, Child’s comparative marriage plot is not free from racism, but her comparative feminist approach is worth recuperating more fully.

Child devotes considerable energy to representing seventeenth-century Puritan and Native New England communities with realistic details drawn from period sources. She peoples her novel with the names of both Puritan and Native historical persons such as Bradford, Higginson, Morton, Massasoit, Squanto, and Hobomok. However, her novel is not a celebration of the triumph of Puritan New England. Child includes several episodes in which disagreeable Puritan elders bitterly debate the finer points of theology, more anxious to correct religious “toleration” than to build community. Their open hostility toward one another spreads outward as Child depicts the Puritans’ distrust of their Wampanoag allies and repeatedly shows Puritan elders making derogatory comments about competing sects of dissenters, Puritan women, and Native peoples alike. Child’s detailed and historically documented representations of Puritan bigotry become a critical lens on Puritan patriarchy as well when their rigidity in matters of faith carries over into tyrannical control of their children’s romantic lives. For instance, Mary Conant’s father flatly rejects his daughter’s wealthy and attractive Anglican suitor, practically driving her into the arms of Hobomok. Child builds readers’ sympathy for Mary’s difficult situation by creating an overall negative impression of seventeenth-century Puritan society as intolerant, fractious, and restrictive. Child similarly textures her depictions of Wampanoag peoples with the same level of historical detail she gives to Puritan characters and settings. For instance, she describes disagreements between Wampanoag leaders Corbitant and Hobomok regarding the desirability of a continuing alliance with the Puritans. As with the theological debates in the Puritan community, these disputes fade to the background as Mary’s interracial romance with Hobomok takes precedence. Child notably makes her most strident critiques of Anglo-American patriarchy through comparisons of Puritan and Wampanoag attitudes about gender and marriage.
Figure 1. A series of images demonstrating Wendat (Huron) courtship and wedding customs from Baron Lahontan’s *Mémoires de l’Amérique Septentrionale ou la Suite des Voyages de Mr. Le Baron de Lahontan* (1703). Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.
Child offers glimpses of a more tolerant and balanced Native gender system among Northeast Woodlands groups by portraying, for instance, the specifics of an “Indian” wedding ceremony with details from Baron Lahontan’s memorable account of Wendat (Huron) courtship and wedding rituals in his Mémoires de l’Amérique Septentrionale (1703). Setting aside questions of Lahontan’s credibility and the misguided use of Wendat traditions in lieu of appropriate ethnographic data on Wampanoag marriage practices, Child’s attempt to locate ethnographically rich primary-source details on Native marriage traditions demonstrates her investment in portraying Wampanoag characters with cultural and historical integrity. We should read Child’s turn to historical sources such as Lahontan’s not as a repetition of obvious stereotypes, but rather as a serious attempt at cultural relativism before such a concept had a name.

Lahontan’s account of Wendat courtship and marriage ceremonies has obvious appeal for Child. Lahontan describes and illustrates Wendat courtship in vivid detail. If a young man wants to pursue a lover, he takes a torch to her bedside and shines the light on her. If she agrees to spend time with him, she uncovers her face. If she prefers to reject this suitor, she covers herself with her blanket. This takes place in her parents’ home with their ostensible supervision. In the illustration accompanying Lahontan’s text (figure 1), the two sit beside each other chatting in bed (a tradition akin to colonial New England bundling, which I explore in chapter 5). A Wendat woman may accept or shun the attentions of multiple suitors, engage in close physical contact (including premarital sex), and enter a one-year trial marriage with no loss of social status.

In Hobomok, Child imaginatively extends the autonomy of Wendat courtship and marriage to Mary Conant. For instance, even as she attempts to defuse her readers’ resistance to Mary’s interracial marriage to Hobomok by suggesting her heroine’s mentally and emotionally fragile state, Child gives Mary considerable agency in setting the terms of her marriage. Mary proposes to Hobomok; she requests that they relocate to Hobomok’s “wigwam”; she consents to an “Indian” marriage ceremony and exchanges vows of love with her husband. She is remarkably in control of the situation, in fact. Details of the wedding ceremony follow Lahontan’s basic outline. Mary’s wedding ceremony is witnessed by four of Hobomok’s relations, who “joined in a dance, singing in a low tone.” The couple circles their home, hand in hand, reentering the dwelling and taking hold of the opposite ends of a witch-hazel wand (see figure
2). The elderly “Indian” officiant reminds the couple of their respective duties: Hobomok must “hunt plenty of deer for his wife, love her, and try to make her happy,” while Mary “should love her husband, and cook his venison well, that he might come home . . . with a light heart.” The couple publicly declares their love. Hobomok then takes the wand and breaks it into pieces, distributing them among the witnesses as a record of the event/relationship. The company sings and dances around the couple three times, tobacco is smoked, and the guests leave: “The ceremony of that morning was past recall; and Mary Conant was indeed the wife of Hobomok.” Although it is difficult to assess whether such details are accurate, Child remains remarkably neutral in her protoethnographic presentation of Mary’s “Indian” wedding ceremony. Unlike many accounts that deride Native cultural traditions, Child reserves judgment on the particularities of the event. In terms of plot, Child does not endorse Mary’s spousal choice; neither, though, does she ridicule the proceedings. Rather, Child imbues her version of a Native marriage ceremony with pomp and ritualistic detail, legitimizing indigenous forms of marriage and the authority of Native peoples to regulate their own marriages.

The detail with which Child infuses Mary’s “Indian” marriage scene suggests not only a desire for historical accuracy, but also an activist’s
attempt to reimagine history from nonpatriarchal perspectives. For instance, she clearly chooses Lahontan’s picture of indigenous gender relations over William Wood’s *New England’s Prospects* (1634), a more regionally appropriate but highly critical account of Native women. In his chapter on Pequod and Narragansett women, for instance, Wood describes the misery of Native women as they compare their situation with the romantic affection English women supposedly receive: “Since the English arrivall comparison hath made them [Native women] miserable, for seeing the kind usage of the English to their wives, they doe as much condemne their husbands for unkindnesse, and commend the English for their love.” Wood’s account is a typical example of what David Smits identifies as the “squaw drudge” stereotype: the notion that Native women were forced to perform the most intense labors, such as drawing water, tending fields, and gathering fruits and nuts, while “lazy” American Indian men took on tasks such as hunting, fishing, and diplomatic negotiations primarily associated with the aristocracy in Europe. Smits outlines a second crucial aspect of this stereotype: the supposed lack of conjugal affection in American Indian marriages, evident in Wood’s claim that Native women are “miserable” after comparing their lot with the “love” English women receive. As I discuss at length in chapter 2, this stereotype fundamentally misrepresents the significant spiritual, social, and political roles that Northeast Woodlands Native women possess in relation to their work. The simple fact that Child rejects both Wood and the widely circulated “squaw drudge” stereotype, emphasizing instead Hobomok’s romantic devotion and his public vows of love, suggests her commitment not only to comparing, but also to reevaluating existing attitudes toward Native spiritual, cultural, and romantic values. By taking readers inside Hobomok’s wetu and recognizing the formal wedding rituals as rituals, Child acknowledges the authority of this community to regulate their own marriages as they see fit.

More radically, Child’s comparison leaves open the possibility that Native marriages (as represented by Lahontan) may offer women more freedoms than Anglo-American marriage practices do. Where Mary’s father forbids her marriage to Charles Brown, Lahontan’s fictional Wendat character Adario describes, in dialogue form, his daughter’s insistence and acknowledged right to marry as she chooses. Speaking to Lahontan, Adario explains that even though he disapproves of his daughter’s choice, she will have her way: “She has a mind to’t; and that is enough in our Country. . . . I am oblig’d to comply with my Daughter’s demands.” Adar-
io’s unnamed daughter rejoins, “What do you think Father! Am I your Slave? Shall not I enjoy my Liberty? Must I for your fancy, Marry a Man I do not care for? How can I endure a Husband that buys my Corps[e] of my Father, and what value shall I Have for such a Father as makes Brokerage of his Daughter to a Brute?” In contrast to Wendat courtship and marriage arrangements—in which premarital sex was normal, women had the final say in a marriage partner, and divorce had relatively few social consequences—the norms regulating Anglo-American romantic relations in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries are incredibly restrictive. Women who engaged in premarital sex are regularly shamed and ostracized, fortune was still a prominent consideration despite the increasing rhetoric of companionship, and divorce was difficult to obtain. Even when married, Anglo-American wives were considered feme covert, “covered” by their husbands in the sight of the law. Although Child does not directly draw this comparison, her comparative plot juxtaposes Puritan and Wendat romantic traditions in such a way as to allow readers to judge for themselves.

In this light, Child’s attention to indigenous divorce proceedings exceeds the current critical consensus that it is a plot device used to “vanish” Hobomok and symbolically remove and/or assimilate the nation’s considerable American Indian population. The ease and availability of divorce in many Native communities provide a model for ensuring conjugal happiness and peaceful family relations that Child holds up for her nineteenth-century readers to consider. Indeed, in many Jesuit missionary reports, the lack of divorce in Catholic marriages was a serious barrier for many Wendats to Christianity. In this context, Native divorce policies ensure women’s and men’s individual happiness, and it is precisely the language Hobomok uses to describe his own divorce proceedings. In a remarkable affidavit that combines New England print culture and indigenous record-keeping systems—the sticks held by witnesses of the wedding ceremony—Hobomok requests that the colonial governor validate his “Indian” divorce proceedings, initiated when Mary’s former suitor, Charles Brown, returns. The document notes that Hobomok has requested that the wedding sticks be burned, the ritual necessary for divorce: “this I doe, that Mary may be happie.” Hobomok’s sacrifice is not only a racist fantasy of ending the “Indian problem”—though it certainly is that—it is also an instance when comparison opens a New World of marital possibilities. Under the rules governing Native marriage contracts, as Child depicts them, Mary and Hobomok are freer to consent to marriage and end their marriage than are seventeenth-century Puritans.
or nineteenth-century US citizens. *New World Courtships* recovers precisely such comparative views of marriage as well as the historical conditions and cross-cultural contexts that make this comparative line of sight available.

Chapter 1 explores the significance of comparative analyses of courtship traditions in three Enlightenment genres: popular “marriage-rites” compilations such as *Hymen: An Accurate Description of the Ceremonies Used in Marriage, by Every Nation in the Known World* (1760) by “Uxorious”; Scottish Enlightenment stadial theory, especially *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) by John Millar; and an early transatlantic novel, *The Female American* (1767) by Unca Eliza Winkfield (pseudonym). Restoring the Enlightenment emphasis on comparing marital diversity illuminates the disruptive potential of New World settings and cultural practices in a variety of genres; such power is especially evident, though, in the narrative practices and hybrid points of view frequently employed in transatlantic Anglophone fiction. In its comparisons of the “commonly domestick” nature of most women’s stories with the pleasures of Native women’s mobility and romantic autonomy, *The Female American* challenges the nationalist and imperialist comparative agendas of “Uxorious” and Millar.

Chapter 2 moves from genre studies to consider comparisons in a more specifically grounded geopolitical context: the complex interactions of British, French, Wendat, and Mohawk women in mid-eighteenth-century Canada. Interweaving contemporary Mohawk oral traditions with Frances Brooke’s Canadian novel *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), this chapter explores the binary Brooke establishes between Mohawk women’s right to “chuse a chief” versus British women’s right to “chuse a husband.” While Brooke insists that romantic rights are more important than a voice in the public arena, Mohawk oral tradition shows how Mohawk women’s stories decenter romance narratives, enabling women in the past and present to move beyond the marriage plot and imagine more options for community engagement and personal satisfaction.

Chapter 3 continues to trace women’s romantic relationships, now transitioning to the Caribbean. Interrogating stereotypical reports of Caribbean sensuality and lasciviousness, Leonora Sansay’s *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) draws on her personal observations of mulatto women during the Haitian Revolution to rewrite the seduction plot, the dominant story line in early national US fiction. Through her comparisons of different classes and races of women in the Americas, Sansay expands the range of stories available to women by
rejecting the novel’s predictable conclusions—death or marriage—as she envisions single women joining together in a supportive, homosocial community.

Chapter 4 argues that the anonymously published *The Woman of Colour* (1808) employs a postcolonial strategy of “writing back” through a fictional Caribbean woman of color, Olivia Fairfield, who critiques British marriage practices. In doing so, Olivia posits an authentic reserve of domesticity for herself and others in a distinctly regional but morally equal Caribbean domestic sphere. Such a move not only revises British nationalist claims to moral virtue as expressed in the ideology of domesticity, but also writes back against some of the most important literary styles and colonizing themes of the sentimental novel.

While Olivia Fairfield claims the Caribbean as a legitimate site for domesticity, chapter 5 returns to the new United States and its concern to identify a romantic practice representative of the nation and its values. Where many early nationalist writers embraced Yankee bundling—a courtship practice in which parents permit an unmarried couple to share a bed for the night—the pseudonymous picaresque novel, *The Life and Adventures of Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield, M.D.* (1818), dispatches the comparative mode in favor of a heteroglossic revelry in the diversity of romantic discourse vying for attention in its present moment. The novel’s protagonist, Obadiah, humorously incorporates nearly every romantic discourse and practice in existence, from comparative marriage rites to bundling, adultery, and companionate marriage, highlighting the contradictions in choosing a single national romantic tradition to represent the nation’s extensive marital diversity.

As Joseph Allen Boone explains, marriage, especially as it has been idealized in fiction, has come to be the relationship goal that defines a “fully experienced life.” It is no wonder, then, that many gay couples in the United States are rallying for what one activist group calls “the freedom to marry.” Even as contemporary authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides reject the marriage plot as no longer representative of reality, this plot functions as a central political goal for many monogamous gay couples and LGBT activists hoping to gain state and federal recognition in the twenty-first century. As “Why Marriage Matters,” a public-education campaign for gaining same-sex marriage recognition, argues, “Marriage says ‘we are family’ in a way that no other word does.” The book’s epilogue connects contemporary US debates about same-sex marriage and the definitions, terms, and rights associated with marriage with this longer history of marital diversity in the Anglo-American novel. Rediscovering
the literary history of marital diversity allows us to map the competing rhetorical and discursive strategies currently employed in same-sex marriage debates and the rapid evolution of public opinion surrounding this issue onto a much longer history of controversies surrounding the meanings of marriage.