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## Epilogue

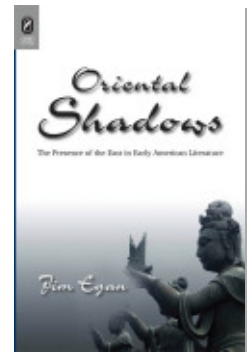
### Published by

Egan, Jim.

*Oriental Shadows: The Presence of the East in Early American Literature.*

The Ohio State University Press, 2011.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24265>.



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## EPILOGUE

This study's primary goal has been to call attention to the vast archive of figures of the East in early American literature. *Oriental Shadows* represents merely a starting point for future work rather than a comprehensive description or comprehensive analysis of the meanings, implications, and significance of figures of the East in early American writing. Much more work is needed not simply because this book's focus on a very limited number of works by just four authors has left an enormous amount of material untouched. It is not, in other words, simply that this study leaves huge gaps in the story of British American writers' use of figures of the East that must be filled in by future scholars. Numerous conceptual questions, problems, and issues remain insufficiently explored in the preceding pages.

I have not, for instance, considered in any detail the way the despotic, luxurious, and hypersexual becomes associated with the East during this period, a set of associations that are quite different for colonial British American writers and readers from those of their counterparts in Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on these topics might change the way we understand the crucial role played by the imperialist imaginings found in the writings of many eighteenth-century British American colonists, who were active participants in the British empire simply because they lived at the very edge of that empire, as well as in works by citizens of the new nation, whose involvement in a newly formed political culture in which expansion across a continent filled with people—of American, African, and European

descent—served as a defining though controversial issue of collective identity.<sup>2</sup> And surely the presence of the East in early American writing deserves greater examination than this book has offered in order to investigate the role that figures of the East play in the emergence, development, and/or production of modern American categories of race that come into being during the same years this study covers. Whether we believe that modern notions of race were born in the seventeenth or the eighteenth century or believe, instead, that these notions existed in practice if not in name even before modern forms of imagining collectivity emerged, figures of the East surely played their role in the production of a category of collective identity, race, whose foundational logic required that each racial group differentiate itself from every other racial group across a spectrum of difference rather than within a binary system. Someone was black not only because they were not white but also because they were not Asian or Native American or Polynesian. The crucial role figures of the East played for the writers covered in this book, and the way these figures tied Eastern people, places, and things to the very category of the civilized, suggests a role for these figures in the production of a system of classifying identity that continues, in some sense, to structure American culture.<sup>3</sup>

And what role did the peoples of the East themselves play in the often contradictory concepts, images, and ideas associated with these regions by the British American writers of the period this study covers? To be sure, British American colonists and members of the new nation had precious little contact with people across the Pacific. Recent research, though, has shown that they had far more contact than we have heretofore believed and, in any case, sustained contact is surely not the only way that people on one side of the globe influence the way people on another side figure them.<sup>4</sup> Historical events, literary texts, and economic exchanges name only a few of the myriad of possible forces that might produce ripple effects strong enough to alter a discursive system in some distant land whose people have never met. My focus on the implications and associations called forth by figures in a single text has limited my ability to examine these particular kinds of ripple effects, but this does not mean that I think they do not exist or are unimportant.

Each of these issues constitutes an important matter about which much more worked is needed. The most important questions this study prompts for literary scholars, though, concern what effect a greater attention to the presence of the East in early American writing might have on the story we tell of American literature. What does the history of American literature look like once we have incorporated the figures of the East that litter the

archives into our story of the literature of this nation? What difference does it make to the story of the beginnings of a distinctly American literature when we are aware that this very literature was born, at least in part, of a sense of inadequacy, an inadequacy that grew out of a triangular structure in which New England, Virginia, Bermuda, Georgia, and other American locales would always be judged inferior not only to Europe but also, and more profoundly, given that it was the very landmass America was supposed to be, to an East that Americans could never be? What previously obscured themes, concepts, problems, and formations come into our line of sight when we recognize that a careful attention to early American writings shows that they cast their value as much in terms of those goods, ideas, and forms they considered a part of the Eastern world, a world they understood primarily as mediated by their so-called betters in Europe? What might we learn about the rhetorical battles over that for which America would stand, battles in which literature played a crucial role, once we pay more attention to the role of the East as a foundational fiction, one whose meanings and discursive power grew out of a mix of American writers' admiration of, fear of, and desire for what the East had to offer?

These questions are, of course, completely in step with recent scholarship that examines American literature in relation to intersections and connections that extend beyond the nation proper. Scholars have sought to read early American literature in relation to a variety of paradigms that challenge the strictly nationalist trajectory that traditionally dominated the field. Transatlantic, hemispheric, and global approaches have each been singled out by scholars as the best way to illuminate American literature, especially early American literature.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars are now arguing as well that greater attention needs to be paid to the eighteenth-century Pacific. *Oriental Shadows* grows out of these efforts to show the inadequacy of seeing American literature, and especially early American literature, as a pure product of American soil whose development and many conflicting traditions, figures, and forms can be satisfactorily understood without recourse to material drawn from outside America's own tradition. I began researching the literature that would eventually provide the focus of the four chapters that make up *Oriental Shadows* from a Transatlantic perspective, but my research on figures of the East in the literature of the period led me to see the severe limitations such an approach has for understanding of the literature and culture of the period. To be sure, the shadows of the Orient were cast as much from Europe as from the Orient itself, so that the value American writers granted the New World when linking a burgeoning American culture to civilizations in the East grew largely out of the value those fig-

ures accrued in European discursive systems rather than in ones in Asia. Nonetheless, too great a focus on the Atlantic has a tendency to reinscribe a vision of the world that places Europe and the United States at the very center of the globe. The works examined in *Oriental Shadows* have been not simply marked by signs attesting to America's provincial position within European structures of power but also (and ironically) have pointed out Europe's fear of its own provincial status, at least during much of the period studied, in relation to Asian and Southeast Asian economic power and cultural traditions. For Europe to acquire its status in Western discourse as the site for "civilized" cultural production and "legitimate" economic power, the East had to be displaced. The writers examined in the preceding chapters contributed to the emergence of a new discursive system with Europe at its center. In constructing another tradition within American literature, one in which figures of the East bind Bradstreet and Poe in a shared attempt to imagine their own sense of their collective identity in relation to Europe, *Oriental Shadows* thus hopes to help illuminate one small but significant discursive element in the emergence of a modern symbolic spatial economy. This new world of symbolic associations would relegate the East to the dustbin of history and, in the process, open up a set of questions, problems, and issues related to early America's role in the formation of discursive systems that help provide the conceptual foundations which, in part at least, guide our interactions with each other and the material world.