Title
Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America by Kathleen Donegan

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Catastrophe epitomized the early American colonial experience. It manifested in myriad forms: English colonists hallucinated, they propped up near-dead comrades against trees to give a façade of vigilance that contradicted their own feelings of vulnerability, they were driven to blasphemy and cannibalism when confronted with hunger and, in the most extreme case at Roanoke, they simply disappeared. This collective misery proved formative. Kathleen Donegan, Associate Professor at the University of California—Berkeley, argues that similar experiences bound dispersed and disparate English colonists throughout the New World with a common identity that stood in contrast to their fellow Englishmen. According to Donegan, “the unsettling act of colonial settlement” contributed directly to colonial identity formation (2).

In a laudable interdisciplinary effort, Donegan deploys trauma theory, in conjunction with literary analysis, to expose the fragility of colonial psyches. Focusing on the early stages of settlement in Roanoke, Jamestown, Plymouth, and Barbados, Donegan’s study relies on close readings of historically marginalized works by Ralph Lane, George Percy, William Bradford, and Richard Ligon. She also identifies an alternative reason for these works’ secondary reputation: the frustrating and inconsistent nature of these sources is evidence of colonial crisis management. Donegan unpacks the unorthodox, discursive style of each source and demonstrates how seemingly tangential insertions of fictional events, shifts in tense (often to the conditional), abrupt stylistic changes, the conspicuous absence of certain content, and deployment of exaggerated rhetoric—a framework she terms the “colonial tropic”—all represent discursive attempts to make sense of colonists’ realizations of the morbid difference inherent in their separate colonial identity.

While the sources Donegan used were originally produced to serve promotional purposes for New World settlements, these texts make clear that distinctions existed between reports on the ground and those for and by London officials. One of the many strengths of Seasons of Misery is Donegan’s ability to
tease out the implications of this variance. Although Peter Mancall (2007) previously argued for a “grammar of colonization” that became institutionalized as early as 1584, Donegan instead outlines how colonists themselves crafted a discourse of a very different, and much less triumphant, sort. All of the works that Donegan examined outline a shift from a “grammar of the colonists as subjects” to the Crown toward a “grammar of colonists as objects,” which increasingly highlighted the powerlessness of their condition through recognition of colonists’ reliance upon the magnanimity of their indigenous neighbors (33). In other words, Donegan places this disconnect between the literature of the center and that of the periphery at the foundation of early English colonization.

Equally important is fact that Donegan’s work will serve as a model for the future study of emotions in early America. Scholars interested in the history of emotions have rarely ventured into the early colonial period, due to a perceived lack of sources and inconsistent methodological approaches. In spite of this, Donegan is able to build off the earlier concept of “emotional communities” offered by Barbara Rosenwein (2006) and apply it to the seventeenth-century English Atlantic with spectacular results; she does so by focusing on the connective qualities of the interrelated emotions of fear, anxiety, and abandonment. While one may wonder if the outwardly projected violence that Donegan suggested represents the only coping mechanism within these “emotional communities,” *Seasons of Misery* nevertheless represents a landmark work that will provoke debate regarding the nature and significance of violence and emotion to the study of early America for the foreseeable future.

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