Erik R. Seeman’s *Speaking with the Dead in Early America* (2019)

*With Jamie L. Brummitt, Kira Moolman, Julia Reed, Erik R. Seeman, and Jeffrey Smith*

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Jamie L. Brummitt: I want to thank Erik for letting us talk about his book, *Speaking with the Dead in Early America*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2019. Erik’s book won the 2020 Lawrence W. Levine Award from the Organization of American Historians for the best book in American cultural history. This book is so relevant for our special issue and what we are all researching in the study of Protestantism. It is a real pleasure to be able to talk about this book. Let’s start with our first question.

**Question:** *Speaking with the Dead in Early America* argues that the Protestant Reformation did not end communication between the living and the dead, as historians have assumed. According to Seeman, ‘In practice, Protestants proved not quite so willing to abandon the relationships with the dead to which they had long been accustomed’ (p. 3). Protestants continued...
speaking with the dead from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries to form intimate relationships with the dead. What do we think about this argument, in general, and in terms of our own work on Protestantism, corpses, or mourning? What implications does this have for historians and scholars of Protestantism in the United States and beyond?

Jeffrey Smith: Erik, I also have a follow-up question. To what extent is speaking with the dead mediated by the fact that the dead are not necessarily the ones who are creating these communications? What are your thoughts on the filtering process?

Erik R. Seeman: That’s something that archaeologists deal with all the time. The remains of funerary rituals show us what the survivors wanted to happen, not necessarily what the deceased wanted to happen. For me, that’s the interesting part of the story. With all these practices, I’m interested in the meanings that people are trying to make out of what they perceive to be their relationships with the deceased. What the deceased wanted or believed him or herself is, sort of, irrelevant. By the time you get to the situation when you have a grave marker or oil portrait or spiritual journal filled with prayers for the dead, the story becomes about what the mourners, what the survivors, believe. That’s what I’ve tried to document. I’ve tried to pull together these various sources that show the living imagining and thinking through what they perceive to be their continued relationships with the dead. That’s the very filtration process that you’re asking about. That is what interests me.

Jeffrey Smith: There are these cases, starting with the rural cemetery movement, where people are purchasing family lots, monuments, and, in some cases, they’re purchasing these things for themselves. So, what is on the monuments they’ve chosen? What are your thoughts on people making this conscious effort to communicate with the future living, if you will?

Erik R. Seeman: That is something that I wasn’t really referring to in the first part of my answer, which is when the living try to shape what their memory is going to look like after death. That’s an interesting subset of these things. I’ve run across occasional letters in the archives like this. I remember one from my first book [Pious Persuasions, 1999] in the American Antiquarian Society archives. A young woman named Sarah Prince was suffering from an illness and imagined herself dying relatively soon. She wrote a letter to her friends and family to be opened only after her death. There are other examples of this, but they’re not that common in the
archives. I’m not sure how frequently people tried to shape the memory of themselves by leaving a message. I didn’t really discuss those in this book, because those are a slightly different category of the living trying to speak as if from the dead. It’s a form of imaginative communication or a representation of communication between the living and the dead when the person is still living. I don’t know if other people have encountered this in their research, or similar sorts of things.

**Jamie L. Brummitt:** I have. First, I’ll say that for the study of nineteenth-century American Protestantism, this book is a major intervention in the historiography. Most historians and religious studies scholars have interpreted a stark break between Catholicism and Protestantism after the Reformation. They have treated Protestants as if they don’t engage in material devotional practices with the dead. I think this book is an important step in getting historians and scholars of religion to actually engage with Protestant mourning practices, objects of the dead, and deathbed narratives. So, I really appreciate this book. In my own work, I have seen something similar to what Erik mentioned. I work on nineteenth-century deathbed narratives in the United States. As people recount observing deathbeds, they write about how their loved ones had visions of God or Jesus. These ecstatic experiences are liminal experiences between heaven and earth, where the dying report engaging with the supernatural and speak on their deathbeds about the supernatural. In some deathbed letters, starting in the 1830s, authors report that dying people give objects to the living around the deathbed. These objects are supposed to be memory objects that the living use after the death of their loved ones, to make a connection with the dead in the afterlife.

**Julia Reed:** I can build on that. I found Erik’s book so wonderful and inspiring. I work on mostly European sources, and, right now, mostly Catholic sources. I’m currently studying debates about the Eucharist and medical cannibalism in Catholicism and Protestantism, and the policing of analogies regarding eating and digestion. I think the questions that come out of this book are so motivating for intra-Christian scholarship when thinking about the enduring binaries, as Jamie mentioned, that have kept the scholarship of Protestantism and Catholicism separate. I have been thinking and struggling with a set of questions about how to approach both inter-religious and intra-Christian history. The book also does a really wonderful job of breaking down distinctions between elite and lay practices, and thinking about those relationships. My questions, which draw on a question from our list [see below], are: what is imagined communication? What
is the relationship between imagination and materiality? Erik, you very specifically state that nineteenth-century Americans didn’t think they were actually communicating with the dead. So, how do we understand actually speaking with the dead in popular religious and cultural practices, not just elite academic debates and theology, but a kind of popular theology implicit in lived religion?

**Question:** How does the book’s use of imagination (pp. 51, 253–65), ‘imaginative literature’ (pp. 130–58), and ‘imagined communication’ (pp. 263–5) fit with the focus on material Protestantism? Is there a tension between ‘material’ and ‘imagined’? How do you see the relationship between ‘material’ and ‘imagined’ in your own work?

**Erik R. Seeman:** I would add one slight qualification to what Julia said, which was really fantastic, about imagined communication. I think it’s only sometimes that people recognize that their communication is imagined. Sometimes, they think it’s very real. I tried to distinguish between those two types of communication in the book. When a person has been visited by a ghost that they perceive to be their father coming back from heaven, they take that communication with the dead to be real. There are other forums, like elegies or gravestone epitaphs, where the person perceives it to be imagined. But, your larger point stands: that the relationship between imagined communication and the material forms of communication is a really interesting one. When I’m looking at the relationship between the material and the imagined, I’m more interested in the meanings that the survivors are making out of the material. The gravestone, for me, kind of sits there until someone comes up to it and reads the epitaph, or is inspired by the proximity of the person’s mortal remains to think about that person. That’s the moment where the relationship between the living and dead is engaged. Or, an oil portrait is just kind of hanging there on the wall until a person is looking at it, making meaning from it, and thinking about the person who’s deceased. I don’t want to make objects sound entirely inert in that formulation. I do think that objects have what some scholars call ‘agency’ (I like to call it power), where objects shape human action [e.g., Wharton 2014]. A gravestone will draw people to a place that people otherwise would not have gone to. My wife will tell you this is true, given the number of times we pull over on the side of the road, when I see a new cemetery. Or, an oil portrait will bring someone to a wall that they wouldn’t have stood next to otherwise. Objects do exert some kind of power. But, the meaning-making happens when the person is drawn to the object, then contemplates that relationship, and builds on that relationship.
Kira Moolman: Thanks, Erik. I want to add that it was such a pleasure to read this book. It’s so well written, enjoyable, and entertaining. I’m coming at this as a theologian, which is a little bit different than most of us here. The tension between those who are grieving creating contrasting theologies to what they’re hearing from the pulpit was so interesting to me. I am still thinking about it and trying to unpack some of that. Going back to the original question, I really appreciate how you complicated the historical narrative that neatly divides Protestants and Catholics, and how you are adding to a growing volume of scholarship on that. Jeffrey mentioned people who are living planning ahead to preach from the grave. I wonder how that comes into play with what you were saying about objects having power? Some of that power comes from somebody planning ahead as well. How does that work as they are commissioning portraits or planning what’s going on their gravestone? Or, is that something the family would have been doing afterwards?

Erik R. Seeman: It’s more typical that it’s the family doing it afterwards. However, Jamie has some great examples in her book [Protestant Relics in Early America, forthcoming with Oxford University Press] of the dying planning ahead. For example, some dying people gave away clothes on their deathbeds. These are really fantastic examples of establishing the grounds for the relationship that they hope will persist after they’re dead. With most of the material forms that I look at in the book, such as the portraits, they are commissioned after death. Not all of the portraits, but most of them, are of children and were painted after an unexpected death. These are upper- and middle-class families who haven’t managed to sit for a portrait yet. The child is undocumented. They want to remember the child. They do that in a moment of grief. The artist comes out, sketches the child’s corpse, and then portrays the child as alive. For gravestones, likewise, there are a couple of examples of people writing what they think would be a good epitaph for their graves. I’ve found only a couple of those. The vast majority are family members doing that after the death. For the most part with the objects I’m looking at, it’s really about the survivors and the mourners imagining ways to represent that relationship that they see as continuing.

Kira Moolman: That’s in contrast to what their ministers might be saying? You have this note in the book about how over time ministers changed how they talked about relationships with the dead in response to what people have been doing.
Erik R. Seeman: That’s one of the things that I try to be careful about in the book. In my first book *Pious Persuasions*, 1999, I was very excited about the differences between ministerial and lay interpretations. That was the focus of the book. If I could do it over again, I would spend a little more time talking about the overlap between ministerial and lay interpretations. I was trying to be a little more careful about that in *Speaking with the Dead*. But, again, some of the most exciting and surprising things are the moments when lay people disagree with their ministers. Maybe that’s what I was getting more excited about as I was writing this book, because readers often take away that focus on the differences. But, there’s a lot of overlap between ministerial and lay interpretations about relationships with the dead. In the early part of the book, the overlap is around ghost belief, where ministers are some of the most avid investigators of ghost interventions and appearances. Later in the book, the overlap is around the belief in the dead going to heaven, and in the need for resignation to God’s will. Lay people are very much on board with that, even when they don’t practice it. Even when they are so bereft that they’re breaking down, they understand that the ideal is resignation to God’s will. So, there’s a lot of overlap between lay and ministerial interpretations about the relationships with the dead. I have one paragraph about ministers in the nineteenth century ventriloquizing the dead, imagining their spoken words, which is what Cotton Mather had done a century earlier. It’s a paragraph in a much larger chapter, where the emphasis is, as you rightly point out, on the moments where lay people go beyond ministerial interpretations. I think both of those dynamics are happening, where there’s overlap between lay and ministerial interpretations and moments of departure. If I had had more energy or time, perhaps, I would have spent more time with ministers’ private writings, which I did a fair bit of in my first book. I really didn’t do that for nineteenth-century ministers, but that would be a place to look to see if they were perceiving the differences with lay interpretations as problematic. Or, if they themselves were moving in that direction over time, which I suggest in the book, but don’t have good evidence for. I would love to see someone take that research up and look at ministerial private writings from the nineteenth century to see if they are aware of these differences.

Jamie L. Brummitt: Catherine Brekus writes about this a bit. Brekus is a scholar of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Protestantism. She wrote *Sarah Osborn’s World* [2013] and ‘Sarah Osborn’s Enlightenment’ [2007] about an eighteenth-century evangelical woman. Brekus doesn’t go into this in depth in her book, but one of her chapters suggests there was
a transformation in the late eighteenth century in what Protestant ministers were saying to their parishioners about death, dying, and mourning. In some of their public writings, ministers started to suggest that emotional mourning was not as sinful as they had once thought. There's a turn that starts to happen in the late eighteenth century over what resignation looks like, according to some ministers. I would assume this continues into the nineteenth century. That's really worth exploring more. It seems that it does or would happen. This is a ripe area for research.

Erik R. Seeman: It would be incredibly surprising if they did not move in the direction of greater mourning. They're plugged into the literature about sentiment that's coming out of England. They're plugged into that literature to a greater extent than most of their parishioners. They're witnessing the dominant model for manly mourning becoming more effusive. It would only make sense that the model of truly restrained mourning transformed. You wouldn't want to caricature what the Puritans and early eighteenth-century Protestant ministers said to their parishioners. They understood that people were going to grieve. They just wanted it to be moderate and relatively short lived. But, you would assume that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ministers are themselves grieving more effusively and telling their parishioners that that's fine too.

Jeffrey Smith: To what extent is this communication expanded by the revolution in cemeteries that's taking place? Starting with Mount Auburn, there is an increased emphasis on visiting cemeteries to visit the graves of the departed. People visit a cemetery, generally, as a place, like we think of parks. The whole notion is that the rural cemetery becomes a place of collective memory. In the 1830s, Samuel Walker wrote about this. He says there were as many people in Baltimore who were worthy of note as in the Roman Empire. Yet, where are they? They are in the rural cemetery. This idea of going to the cemetery as part of that collective memory is almost a secular version of this process. I have two questions related to this. One is: to what extent does this focus on visiting these rural cemeteries like parks expand this communication you're talking about? The other question is: do these non-denominational rural cemeteries and ones that grow out of this movement blur that Protestant/Catholic binary? There are a handful of Catholic examples. There's one here in St. Louis across the street from Bellefontaine Cemetery. But, do they blur that line as well, once you have a non-denominational one like Mount Auburn, Greenwood, or Oakdale cemeteries? Does it blur that binary even more by mixing people together in the nineteenth century?
Erik R. Seeman: I was just on a SHEAR [Society for Historians of the Early American Republic] panel with Joy Giguere, whose book [Pleasure Grounds of Death: The Rural Cemetery in Nineteenth-Century American Society and Culture] about rural cemeteries is coming out from the University of Michigan Press relatively soon. She’s done very good work on visitors to rural cemeteries and the inclusionary or exclusionary rules that cemeteries had about those visits. I think there are different kinds of visitors to rural cemeteries. Some visitors are going for the reasons that I described in the book: to commune with the dead, to see the grave sites of specific individuals they knew, and to continue relationships with them. Then there are people who go and, like you say, use the cemeteries as parks. Maybe they think about the dead as a kind of collective entity. Or, maybe, they ignore them entirely and the cemetery is a place to stroll and promenade, see and be seen. One of the points I was trying to make in the book was that the imperative to visit cemeteries was increasing before the rural cemetery movement. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, more and more people in both imaginative literature and diaries are talking about visiting cemeteries.

Jeffrey Smith: A lot of these cemeteries are businesses. They have to come up with ways to generate revenue, particularly up front. One of the ways they do that is by creating and selling big family lots within a cemetery. A number of rural cemeteries had some kind of an event at the dedication, where they auctioned off the opportunity to be the first or second or third to have a lot. The first people who purchased these lots were part of a specific route, sometimes called the tour of the cemetery. This is true here in St. Louis’s rural cemetery, where they auctioned off 15 or 18 lots on the first day. Every lot was either on the tour or could be seen from it. In these cases, people are clearly buying these lots with the idea that everybody who comes here is going to see their grave and stone monument with a name. I wonder if industrialism and consumerism are also informing the way people think about their future memory and their relationship with the living?

Jamie L. Brummitt: I would say so. I work on objects that the living collect from the dead or objects that the dead give to the living, like hair, pictures, or clothes. These are part of the marketplace, even though they are sacred objects. In some instances, hair cut from a dead person and given to a living person is put in a piece of jewelry. That piece of jewelry is commissioned from the marketplace for that object. Likewise, people would commission specific lockets or brooches just for a small image of a dead
person. The marketplace has an important place in understanding what Protestants were doing with the dead and objects of the dead. This leads to another question I had about Jeff’s comment on rural cemeteries as secular places: does the marketplace make these objects secular objects or rural cemeteries secular places? I don’t think so. The word ‘secular’ gets thrown around a lot with rural cemeteries. Erik, you don’t treat them as secular. You are talking about them as Protestant places. But, other historians have treated rural cemeteries as secular. Most religious studies scholars would not treat rural cemeteries as secular places. For instance, Colleen McDaniel’s Material Christianity [1995] studied Laurel Hill Cemetery as a Protestant place for the dead. So, I wonder about the language of secular as we think about the marketplace and the dead. For me, the marketplace does not make the dead secular. The relationship between the marketplace and the dead hints at the fact that nineteenth-century American life was so infused with Protestant practices that people couldn’t separate Protestantism from the landscape or the marketplace. What do other people think about that?

Julia Reed: Building on that, Jamie, one of my questions about the book had to do with the distinction between a religious object and a devotional object. This is for everyone, but especially Jamie, insofar as you are working on Protestant relics. I find the distinction between a secular object of exchange or consumption and a religious object of devotion mostly unhelpful in the study of religious practices. The Roman Catholic Church regulates the classes of relics in terms of the specific body parts, what is permissible to sell, and if and how the relic is displayed and exchanged. That is fundamentally a kind of negotiation of official liturgical worship (as distinct from relic veneration), consumerism, and popular piety. So, I’ve been surprised to read that use of ‘secular’ as a qualifier to talk about Protestant devotional objects that are not considered religious objects because they are commodities. My questions are: how do we think about the nature of a relic in Protestantism? What is this analytic category of the relic, its relationship to devotion, and, particularly, its relationship to these interconfessional questions? I would also like to tie this back to some questions we have been discussing. One thing this book did for me was complicate the distinction between materiality and imagination, as well as the distinction between belief and practice. I think it’s a really fascinating question of how a material object can produce a certain kind of state that is often different than an intended state. This book really transformed the way I thought about objects in religious material culture. It considered an elegy not just as something verbal or as a text, but as an actual physical
object attached to a hearse or a broadside that gets publicized. The visual-
ity is material, but also communal. It has a sort of objectivity to it that
has a social power. We can, then, think about beliefs as being practically
negotiated. The question of what does someone actually believe is not a
final one. It is being negotiated through materiality and the community of
creating these material objects [for more on this, see Morgan 2010]. That’s
another way we can break down the Catholic/Protestant binary. We can
stop thinking about hard and fast theological distinctions, as much as they
are polemically used in the sources, and think about material cultures as
sites of negotiating both elite and popular theologies. This ties back to this
desire to avoid Catholic superstition, especially in the earlier sources you’re
looking at, Erik, and how we think about the relic as an analytic category
for historians of Christianity.

Erik R. Seeman: Jamie, why don’t you take that?

Jamie L. Brummitt: First, I want to go back to Julia’s point about the imagined versus material. I wrestle with this all the time. I didn’t know what to
do with this in Erik’s book. I’ve pushed back against this so much in my own
work. Many scholars of Protestantism, who don’t study material culture,
couch Protestantism in belief. Julia, I think that’s what you’re talking about:
Protestant belief as imagined, as internal, as a thought, as something that’s
happening in a person’s head. In my own work, I’ve pushed back against
this so much. Saying that something is imagined or a belief keeps us from
saying, ‘Protestant communication with the dead simply exists.’ I was
thinking about this more when I read Erik’s book. I do understand what
he’s talking about with some of these things as imagined, but I’m cautious
of using words like ‘imagined’ or ‘imagination’ as a material culture scholar,
because it couches everything back in Protestantism as a thought. I’m
struggling with that still. I understand what Erik is arguing, but I’m uncom-
fortable as a scholar of material Protestantism in talking about imagined
literature or imagined communication. One way we can think more about
this is through the category of relic. I think this is what Julia was pointing
to. Protestants and Catholics have been doing some very similar things
with relics. Protestants, however, redefined those practices a little bit. That
is what I am working on. I have had a lot of pushback on this. People say,
‘No, Protestants don’t have relics. That was their theological break with
Catholicism in the Reformation.’ But, there are some scholars of the Pro-
testant Reformation, like Alexandra Walsham [‘Skeletons in the cupboard,’
2010], who study the reformation of the relic. I am trying to pull this work
into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Protestantism. For me,
a Protestant relic is a real category of religious object, a devotional object. Protestants use the word ‘relic’ over and over and over again in their letters and their publications and their diaries. But, I’ve had to parse out what a relic is as a religious object. Not only is a relic a religious object used in mourning practices, but a relic is also a thing that is left over and is more of a historical object. This is hard: trying to parse out what is actually a religious relic for a Protestant, and what is a historical object that comes out of religious language as Protestants are trying to tame the Catholic relic. I focus on practice to try to figure out how people are using those words. For me, studying Protestant mourning practices, not theologies or creeds, is a way to differentiate the objects that are sometimes called relics. If Protestants are using these objects in mourning practices – at funerals, on death beds, inside or outside of churches, or wearing them on their bodies – this is usually a good indication that this religious object is a Protestant relic. But, language becomes slippery in this type of study. It’s not just that Protestants are using what they call relics as religious objects or historical objects. They also refer to relics as mourning objects by other words. Sometimes, they refer to these mourning objects as memory objects or ‘mementos’ or ‘memorials.’ The language of relics among Protestants is slippery. That is why I focus so intensely on the use of objects and the practices with objects to parse out this category that they are so clearly using, but still uncomfortable with. For me, Protestant relics are mourning objects. They can be body parts – bones, hair, blood – but any object related to a dead person, usually by touch or proximity or emotion, could become a Protestant relic. These objects are very similar to Catholic relics, but Protestants define them in different ways. They couch them in memory as memory objects of individual Protestants, not the objects of saints. This leads us to a set of really interesting questions about the uses of bodies or body parts and the agency of these objects. Julia and Erik mentioned the agency or power of these objects and why these things are so special for Protestants. Let’s talk about why corpses are so special to Protestants and how corpses are powerful for Protestants.

Julia Reed: One place to start – given Erik’s book and comments, and Jamie’s current project – is to think about the Protestant corpse or the corpse in Protestant cultures in relation to the much longer history of Christianity. For example, I’m thinking of Peter Brown’s argument [The Cult of the Saints, 1981] about early Christians fusing the tomb and the altar. The dead Christian body became a site of mourning and negotiation, not just in Christian practice, but also in Christian theology. The Catholic Catechism, for example, distinguishes between the veneration of the relic and
the worship of God to avoid idolatry. I think it would be really amazing and wonderful to think about the Protestant corpse in the history of Christian worship and Christian life, which would open up new ways of analyzing the Protestant corpse in the history of the sacraments, liturgy, and rituals of Christian death and burial. The discussion of Protestant corpses seems to be similar to issues in early churches, where altars and tombs become fused because of the status and locations of the Christian dead. I think that would be a really fruitful site of comparison, particularly because the virtue that is supposed to be expressed in the Catholic relic is not a relationship with the dead person. It’s a relationship with the material remains through which the dead person can continue their holy work. In both cases, the corpse is like a node, as Erik said. Thinking about the corpse as a node of mourning, veneration, and even worship (in the fusion of tomb and altar) can help unpack some of the ways that Protestants were renegotiating and redefining the dead Christian body in sacramental life. This was done in very precise ways around the ways objects get held and carried, how often you visit a cemetery, what kind of broadsheets are publicized, and even in a minister’s private writings and public sermons.

**Erik R. Seeman:** I think that’s fantastic. This is something I’ve been arguing for a long time. My 2001 *Journal of American History* article [‘Reading Indians’ deathbed scenes’] about deathbed scenes talks about the fact that the Protestant/Catholic binary emerges from the polemics of the sixteenth century, and was carried forward by emphasizing the contrast between the two confessions rather than all of the things that they share. This goes back, like you say, all the way to late antiquity with the original rise of the cult of the saints that Peter Brown documents so beautifully. I’m totally on board with what you’re saying. That’s why I think it’s really important to pay attention to the *words* that Protestants use when they’re dealing with the objects they’re referring to as relics. This is where Jamie and I, sometimes, have slightly different approaches. She’s really a material culture person. I come from a more literary source background. I always want to know how people imagine their relationships with these objects. I find these moments especially illuminating, not just when we have a mourning portrait of a deceased person, but when we have someone writing about that portrait. There are things that Protestants referred to as relics that they really are using simply to evoke a kind of generalized memory of the person or to remember his good deeds. I think that’s an important use of relics by Protestants, but I think it’s a different use of relics than one where a person sits in front of an object and speaks to it, prays to it, or imagines that person in heaven or nearby in a kind of guardian angel relationship. For all of these
places where we see potential continuities between Catholic and Protestant behaviors and beliefs, I want to be really careful in each instance to look at it and ask: does this object have a numinous power? Does it represent a relationship with the dead? Or, is it something different about memory in a more generalized sense that doesn’t imply a continuing relationship?

Jeffrey Smith: A couple of questions go through my mind listening to this. To what extent does this sanctity of body as relic change once it’s in the ground? How does this relate to grave robbing? In the midst of a pandemic, I became curious about grave robbing in the nineteenth century. It was such an unsavory business to be stealing bodies and selling them to medical schools, but it was pretty lucrative. On the other hand, it’s not an occupation that’s for just everybody. I wonder if the reason people are so horrified by grave robbing in the nineteenth century has to do with that sanctity of the body as relic. Those are my two thoughts, but I don’t know where to go with them. I’m hoping you folks have some thoughts.

Kira Moolman: Julia, you’ve probably encountered this a bit with your research on the Eucharist. I wonder how the conversations around corpses map on to people’s understanding of what is happening at the Eucharist. You have Protestants pushing back on a Catholic understanding of real presence. As Jamie mentioned, in the language about relics, you have a shift in language, practice, and theology. Protestants say relics are memory objects because now their Eucharistic theology is memorialization. They remember that Christ died, but there is nothing happening in that moment of the Eucharist in the same way as transubstantiation for Catholics. There’s no agency in the bread and the wine, but memory. It’s also interesting to me how we talk about this now. How much of our surprise at how people valued the corpse in the past has to do with the divorce that we have made between ‘who I am’ and ‘my body.’ These are now two different things and the distinction probably has Protestant roots. This is similar to what Jamie mentioned about not wanting to use the word ‘imagine,’ because it makes it something that’s just happening in our heads. Protestant theology often goes down that route where theology or our spiritual beliefs only happen in our minds, as opposed to being part of an embodied life.

Jamie L. Brummitt: Kira, these are really good points. Alexandra Walsham has done some really good work on how Protestants in the English Reformation redefined a relic as a memory object [‘Skeletons in the cupboard,’ 2010]. This came out of debates on the Eucharist and Catholic relics, where people were negotiating presence and absence. So, I agree with Erik that
for Protestants in England and the United States, relics became memory objects. What I’ve seen, though, is that the definition of memory changed over time. Memory during the Protestant Reformation tried to couch relics in the past or as not having agency. In the late eighteenth century, this way of thinking about memory changed. During the Enlightenment, British philosophers started to understand memory as a lively, embodied process. Memory became embodied in objects. Those objects, because they had memories, were alive. That’s where I’m trying to understand these relics as memory objects. They are about memory, but not in the same ways we think of memories as being in the past. People were theorizing memory as embodied and having agency. This is what I’m trying to understand: how Protestant relics were memory objects, but not in the same way that we necessarily understand memory to work today. My work argues that Protestants, without really meaning to, developed a category of relic that was alive and present because of the ways they accepted Enlightenment notions of memory as a lively, embodied process and memory as objects. I think this is a really interesting way to understand Protestant relics as mourning objects that had agency, or a devotional and sacral power. It is not just that Protestants couched memory objects in the past as dead matter. That’s how I’m theorizing these objects. I also wanted to say something more on corpses. For nineteenth-century American Protestants who wrote deathbed narratives about their loved ones, there seems to be something in the process of a Christian death in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was understood to do something to the corpse that made it a different kind of object. That’s how I am thinking about the agency of corpses, and how people were engaging with them as supernatural nodes, not just as social practices. Protestants wrote deathbed letters that described how a Christian died and how the corpse retained its supernatural character, such that they could read the Christian character on the dead body. Sometimes, people say they can see supernatural marks on the corpse. Protestants definitely don’t think of themselves as Catholic, but they are defining their own popular theology of what happens in death to a body, and how powerful a corpse can be for others who view or touch it.

**Erik R. Seeman:** I would say that most forms of material memorialization that I talked about in the book derive some amount of their power from their proximity to the corpse. Elegies are spoken in Puritan New England, typically, at the funeral with the corpse right there. Talking gravestones are positioned above the person’s human remains and that’s part of their power. The daguerreotypes that portray a corpse in death are often framed
with a lock of hair. These material forms of Protestant memorialization often gain their power from proximity to the corpse.

**Julia Reed:** I love this discussion so much. I want to loop back to Kira’s point about the Eucharist. This is what I’m trying to figure out in my own work right now. It’s very typical in a Eucharistic debate, for example, for a Protestant to distinguish between four or five notions of presence and four or five notions of the real, both in the sense of sign and signified, material and immaterial, and effectual and ineffectual. These distinctions are so technical, but the need to make these distinctions are quite important and revealing. That’s why I think the contribution of this book is much less about resisting the ‘Catholics = presence, Protestants = absence’ dichotomy [Orsi, *History and Presence*, pp. 25–30; Seeman, *Speaking with the Dead in Early America*, p. 9] and more about helping us to nuance the senses of presence, and pose a set of questions about the negotiations around materiality and presence. These are the basic kinds of questions that get negotiated throughout the history of Christianity and Christian life. People are trying to parse the distinctions between devotion and worship, and what is allowed and not allowed. The body itself – whether it’s the body of the loved one, the sacramental body, the church building, the body of the priest – is tied to these debates. The Christian body is interpreted as the node in incarnational theology, but also throughout the central rituals of Christian life. It’s interesting how those rituals get secularized or don’t. I’ve been trying to figure out in my work how to ask the right kinds of questions about how these Eucharistic debates impacted and bled into everyday life. For example, someone looking at a miracle host wasn’t thinking about these theological distinctions, had no knowledge of them, or didn’t care. I’m interested in how the distinctions between the manifold senses of the real and the manifold senses of presence that are vociferously fought over in theological debates do and do not bleed into pastoral care, into Christian practice, and lay theology.

**Erik R. Seeman:** I think that’s an incredibly generative reading of my book. I’m grateful that you put so much thought into it. I would love to see scholars nuance the various forms of presence. Obviously, I don’t believe in the ‘Catholics = presence, Protestants = absence’ dichotomy. But, I hadn’t really considered nuancing the idea of presence. In terms of the Eucharist, I would go back to Brooks Holifield’s book [*The Covenant Sealed*, 1974], which talks about New England Puritans’ ideas about the Lord’s Supper, and the extent to which Christ’s presence was so important for many participants in that ritual. When you’re talking about Eucharistic theology, it’s
easy to see the differences between Catholics and Protestants. When you talk about the experience of communion and the experience of presence, then it’s a much less stark difference.

Jamie L. Brummitt: Great! Do we have any other thoughts on corpses or theorizing corpses? Where do we want to go next? There are a couple of questions about gender. We should get to one of those. Let’s start with this one.

Question: Chapter 7, ‘Religious objects, sacred space, and the cult of the dead,’ is the culmination of Speaking with the Dead in Early America. It examines how a multitude of nineteenth-century Protestants communicated with the dead via words, images, objects, and visits to graveyards. Erik writes, ‘These practices and more constituted what I argue was a cult of the dead, a religious complex that in the early nineteenth century emerged from Protestantism but contained lay- and especially female-driven elements distinct from mainstream Protestantism’ (p. 191). Who or what counts as ‘mainstream’ Protestantism? How is ‘mainstream’ Protestantism different from the Protestant practices with the dead examined in the book? To what extent does gender define ‘mainstream Protestantism’?

Erik R. Seeman: I’ll say what I was trying to get at with the phrase ‘mainstream Protestantism.’ To the extent that I could identify denominations or individuals who belonged to a particular denomination, I was finding examples from across the denominational spectrum. There were strongly evangelical denominations, like Baptists and Methodists, as well as the old mainline denominations. I was trying to use ‘mainstream Protestantism’ to talk about anything that wasn’t a new religious movement of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, such as Shakers and Mormons. I was trying to suggest that the practices I was discovering were very broadly shared. They weren’t the province of a particular denomination or even something broader such as evangelical or mainline or liturgical. The practices were really across the spectrum.

Jamie L. Brummitt: Can you say more about whether you think the cult of the dead was part of mainstream Protestantism? Or, is it distinct from mainstream Protestantism? How ubiquitous do you think this Protestant cult of the dead was?

Erik R. Seeman: I feel that it was part of mainstream Protestantism as Protestantism was practiced and lived by people. You wouldn’t find some
of these tenets if you went to a theology school and asked, ‘What do you consider to be the main theological tenets of Protestantism?’ But, if you look at how people experienced it and lived it, then absolutely, this was a central part of mainstream Protestant practice by the first half of the nineteenth century. In terms of the gender component, I wanted to know what people were actually doing rather than what they were being told to do. I always want to go to the sources that document as broad a range of voices as possible, including lay voices. That’s why there are so many different types and genres of sources that I examined in the book. This includes the use of material culture, which gets you to a broader range of voices, and allows for some understanding of women’s voices in times when there are fewer women’s sources.

Jamie L. Brummitt: I have a follow-up question about this. I also want to hear what others think. I agree that we can hear women’s voices in material culture, for example, in examining mourning embroideries, or we can see more women’s voices emerge with the cult of the dead. My question is this: just because we hear more women’s voices in some of these sources, does that mean these practices are driven by women? Are these practices particularly feminine practices with the cult of the dead? Or, is this really the first time, in the nineteenth century, that we’re getting more women’s voices? I think this is a really important distinction to make. I wanted to hear what others thought about this.

Erik R. Seeman: With my work, some of the practices are clearly female. For example, mourning embroidery is an entirely female practice. To the extent that those sources document participation in the cult of the dead, it’s a female-driven aspect of the cult of the dead. In other sources, it’s harder to say the extent to which the evidence for these cult of the dead beliefs is an artifact of the sources or if I’m missing something. I looked at lots of men’s diaries, and a much smaller percentage of them document the kinds of beliefs that I’m talking about in Chapters 7 and 8. That could be because men are not participating and don’t believe those things. Or, because they’re less likely to write them down. At the end of Chapter 8, I use the case of Edward Everett, where he let slip in this one letter to a minister that he’s been maintaining relations with his dead daughter for the last two years. Then, in the incredibly voluminous diary that he left, there aren’t the kinds of lengthy passages praying to her or describing cemetery visits to see her that I would have expected in a woman’s diary. It’s possible that I’ve exaggerated the extent to which these are female-driven practices.
Maybe there are more men like Edward Everett, who are believing these things, participating in them, but not writing them down.

Jeffrey Smith: Yet, these non-denominational cemeteries are exclusively the dominion of men. Men design them, men found them, men organize them, and men run them. We can say with almost the same percentage that as treatment of the body and burial becomes professionalized, undertakers are all men. Once in a while, when you get to the beginning of the twentieth century or the late nineteenth century, you’ll see an ad for a female embalmer, undertaker, or mortician. I wonder about this dichotomy over gender. While we see women involved in all these, at the same time, thanks to urbanization and industrialization, we see all of this gets more organized and professionalized and men take it over. That leaves, therefore, certain dominions relegated to women, whether they’re left over or consciously handed to them. You never see the name of a woman on the board of one of these cemeteries, except for the Confederate ones. That’s the one difference where you’ll see these Ladies’ Memorial Associations and, later on, the United Daughters the Confederacy. They are women who get their jobs done. But, the rest of these are a male domain. I’m wondering how we parse that out.

Julia Reed: To build on Jeff’s point, there is a question of how the specifically gendered distinctions between mourning – not just manly mourning, but the ways that the activities of professional associations, mortuary sciences, cemetery building and designing, and then practices that are not only done by women – get confined to a particular kind of mourning that is also feminized.

Kira Moolman: Going back to Erik’s description of that one gentleman who let slip that he had this relationship with his dead daughter. I wonder if there’s a difference in how women are experiencing being allowed to talk about their relationships with the dead. Maybe men feel that that’s less acceptable. Or, there’s even an education difference, where they’re not supposed to be doing that and are more reticent to reveal that in their own personal writings. Somewhere in the book, you had a journal entry where somebody had crossed out what they had written to reflect a more orthodox way of thinking. There is this self-editing that might happen when people are discussing their relationships with the dead. How is that reflected, maybe differently, in men and women?
Erik R. Seeman: I think you’re exactly right. Certainly, the people who are leaving behind the sources that I’m looking at are generally pious Protestants. They’re aware of the norms. In my first book, I have an example of a person who writes in her diary ‘pain, pain’ and crosses that out. That was just too much. She wanted to emphasize her resignation to God’s will and acceptance of this pain. In Speaking with the Dead in Early America, Louisa Trumbull crosses out that she might have seen her brother Johnny’s spirit floating above the grave site. These pious Protestants are aware of the expectations. I think you’re absolutely right that there are differing gender expectations by the nineteenth century regarding mourning, how deeply one grieves, how emotionally one grieves. We wouldn’t want to say that men were supposed to be unemotional. They absolutely were supposed to express grief, but it was, in general, expected to be for a shorter period of time and less deeply expressed. People were aware of that and that constrained their behavior.

Jeffrey Smith: To what extent do you think these gender roles changed with industrialization, and the fact that in the late nineteenth century people are removed from corpses and death? There are fewer and fewer women who are in charge of taking care of these corpses. People turn corpses over to an undertaker now. People are not going to bury the dead somewhere nearby. They send them to a commercial place at a privately run cemetery. It might even be a denominational place such as the Hebrew Cemetery in Wilmington, North Carolina, embedded in Oakdale Cemetery. I wonder if people have less of this immediate dealing with the dead, do they start to define those roles more clearly and draw those lines more strongly on gender lines?

Erik R. Seeman: I think the answer is yes, but in the United States that’s really a post-Civil War development. Through the period that my book covers, women are still taking care of the corpse in the home, almost without exception, through the 1850s. After that, I think it is an important development, like you’re saying, with the rise of the male undertaker, the professionalization of death, and removing the corpse from the home. I teach a big lecture class every couple of years called ‘Death in America.’ There is usually a question about the extent to which women were relieved to have these duties taken from them in the second half of the nineteenth century. Taking care of a dead body is not pleasant, even if it can be powerful. I don’t have any evidence about women’s attitudes toward the professionalization of death work. Did any of them feel like, ‘Wow. Finally, I can not clean up a corpse. Isn’t this nice.’ I’d love to see someone work on that.
Jamie L. Brummitt: It’s really interesting that Jeff and Julia brought up definitions of labor and how that influences the way we think about gender. I think labor does, but also politics. Let’s go back to labor and think about mourning embroideries. Yes, girls were making these at school, but we can’t just see girls making these at school as our window onto how these things were made. Very often, if a family was rich enough, they commissioned outside male painters to paint on the embroideries. They commissioned male glassmakers to produce glass matts for the embroideries. Sometimes, the pieces of glass are painted by male artists. Male artists were also producing post-mortem miniature portraits that men and women wore. If we look at mourning in terms of labor and work within the marketplace, we might be able to tell a different story about who’s doing all this mourning work, and how that gets codified in our historical understanding of what’s happening. Mourning work – touching the dead, and producing and touching these objects of the dead – happened outside of houses, where women and men were working as painters or framers. Politics is really important too. Some of my research looks at debates over George Washington’s corpse in the early 1800s. Right after he died, Congress took six months to a year to debate how Washington’s corpse would be interred under the Capitol, and how they were going to erect monuments for him. It’s really interesting that we often read women’s work as mourning work, but we don’t read men talking about dead bodies in political situations as mourning practices. We can complicate the feminization narrative by talking about what counts as mourning work in terms of domestic practice, bodily practice, labor practice, or, even, political practice. They’re all registers in which we can think about mourning or mourning objects as gendered work.

Julia Reed: Jamie, I wanted to connect to that too. This broader conversation is part of a really interesting set of interdisciplinary questions about labor, gender roles, religion, and a set of practices that are moving outside the home in the nineteenth century. A site of comparison in the history of medicine is scholarship on the masculinization of gynecology. How could we comparatively think about the masculinization of mourning and mortuary practices with the rise of mortuary science, or cemeteries and cemetery administration with the history of medicine? One of the major themes in the masculinization of gynecology is negotiations and debates about the nature and virtue of pain with the invention and use of analgesics and anesthesia. The relationship between pain and mourning is a really interesting way to think about the masculinization of traditionally female practices like midwifery and mourning rituals to see what gets transformed, what doesn’t get transformed, and what gets neglected or lost. I think a
comparative set of questions will help us investigate these modes of tra-
ditionally domestic and female practices that transformed, where we have
very few records because we don’t have good archives, or they were largely
oral traditions and home-based traditions. We can think comparatively
across a number of these different practices that get both pulled outside
the home that involve a set of very particular questions around gender. We
can compare the definitions of pain in medicine and mourning and ask:
whose pain should be relieved and why?

Erik R. Seeman: I thought that was a really fascinating question. I don’t
really do anything with medicine in the book. One brief place it shows up is
in one of the motivations for the rural cemetery movement. Some medical
authorities believed that crowded urban graveyards were emitting gases
that were responsible for yellow fever and cholera epidemics. That was one
of the motivations for rural cemeteries that’s been exaggerated in the lit-
erature. But, it definitely was part of it. The other connection that I know of
regarding the corpse comes from after the period of the book. Toward the
end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, physicians argued that
kissing the corpse was dangerous. This took on anti-immigrant overtones,
because kissing the corpse came to be associated with Italians and other
southern and eastern European Catholics. There was that nativist tinge to
this medical advice to avoid kissing corpses. There’s nothing like that in the
period covered by the book. Given our interest in corpses in this special
issue, trying to make those connections between medical theories about
corpses – whether they’re dangerous or not, how they should be handled,
how they should be buried safely – that should be an important part of the
story. It’s not a particularly important part of the story that I tell.

Jamie L. Brummitt: I’m really interested in this too. This is something that
I am also thinking about as I finish up my book. A big part of my project
is about how people touched and kissed corpses, but also bodily objects of
the dead or other objects of the dead. Some archives will not let me pull
things that people kept from graveyards. There was a rumor at one archive
that some buttons were preserved by a family that went to a graveyard and
dug them up. The archivist told me they couldn’t pull the buttons, because
they were in a graveyard where smallpox victims were buried. I’ve also run
across some things in primary sources in the late nineteenth century that
describe corpses as dirty. Or, like Erik was saying, that people shouldn’t
kiss corpses. There seems to be this notion that emerged, and is still preva-
lent today, that corpses are dirty, and that diseases can be transmitted by
corpses for many years. These notions eventually desacralized corpses.
This supports what we have been saying that medical knowledge transformed religious practices.

**Jeffrey Smith:** In the cholera epidemic of 1849 and 1850, there were places that had separate burial grounds for those ‘tainted,’ diseased bodies, including the former President James Polk. He died just three or four months after leaving office as part of a cholera epidemic in Nashville. He was buried, initially, in the cholera lot outside town and moved later.

**Julia Reed:** I’m really interested in the relationship between medical hygiene in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and religious ideas of what is undignified. This was a central question among medical experts and natural philosophers around the Eucharist, the resurrection, and the distinction between the living and the dead. This latter topic brought up another really interesting set of questions for people, which were: what is the definition of bodily death? Who has the expertise to identify a body as dead? Who has the expertise to deal with the corpse? I’m really interested in the relationship between hygiene, or what’s hygienic, what’s dignified or undignified, and how they inform each other. It seems that what’s diseased informs something about what’s undignified, and what’s undignified is also folded into understandings of disease.

**Kira Moolman:** Are you getting into unclean or impure as well?

**Julia Reed:** Yes. The early modern sources about the Eucharist are really fascinating, because they are basing a notion of cleanliness and hygiene on what is dignified or undignified. Largely medieval and early modern debaters would throw up their hands around the question of what actually happens to the host when you digest it. Aristotle had supplied the categories of substance and accident. So, often it was said that whatever is undignified only happens to the accidents. There’s another question which is really interesting: what is undignified? Is digestion undignified? If so, why, if digestion is breaking down something into its composite elements? I’m beginning to think about this in terms of a longer history of Christianity and medicine.

**Jamie L. Brummitt:** This sounds excellent! We are at time. Thank you all for being a part of this. It was wonderful. Erik, thank you so much for letting us discuss your book. I think we all agree that it is going to be read for a long time. It’s going to impact many fields, including history and religious studies. Thank you for writing this and letting us talk about it.
Erik R. Seeman: Thanks to everyone for your comments and questions. It was extremely generative and helpful, and pushed me beyond what’s between the covers.

References


