Introduction

The opening number of *The Federalist* begins with an urgent appeal to the reader that assumes the need for a new approach to administering the thirteen states: "After an unequivocal experience of the inefficacy of the subsisting federal government, you are called upon to deliberate on a new constitution for the United States of America. The subject speaks its own importance; comprehending in its consequences, nothing less than the existence of the UNION, the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed, the fate of an empire, in many respects, the most interesting in the world" (p. 1). Much has been made of the question of whether the federal government required such dramatic revision. Federalist and Anti-Federalist writers argued almost as much about whether a new constitution was necessary as they did about the substance of the proposed constitution. What was not in dispute, though, was Hamilton's characterization of the United States as an empire. Federalists and Anti-Federalists disagreed about the structure of the government that should preside over the development of this new American empire, but they shared a vision of the United States as the American analogue to the European empires that had flourished over the course of the previous century. As Hamilton makes clear here and in subsequent numbers, the US Constitution was designed to ensure the survival and success of this new American empire, which was the most interesting in the world because it had been imagined and organized on a new set of principles that differed fundamentally from the hierarchical structure of Old World empires. The United States has been conceived, as Hamilton and Madison in particular will go on to argue, as a republican empire.

The American School of Empire considers how an American idea of empire evolved in the 1790s and would shape and be shaped by the literature and art of the early United States. Hamilton's introductory essay suggests that empire was as important to the foundation of the United States as such concepts as democracy, freedom, nation, and republic. This book thus begins from the premise that the history of empire in the United States can be traced back to the inception of the country, if not earlier. It contends that the United States was conceived as an empire, culturally, politically, and legally. Empire, as a broad theory for organizing not only the state but also the understanding of difference and the relationship to space, in other words, was a crucial conceptual frame shaping the culture of the early United States. The way that British-Americans in the late eighteenth century imagined their communities, to once again borrow Benedict Anderson's much used term, owed as much to an ongoing debate about empire as it did to any other political concept of the time. Whereas the significance of new thinking about democracy, freedom, nation, and republic to the formation of early US politics and culture has been and continues to be thoroughly analyzed, we are only beginning to understand the way ideas of empire played a major role in this period.[1]

In its initial phase in the United States, empire supplied a model for thinking about how this new nation might negotiate the challenging matter of the relationship between these thirteen states, among which there was a great deal of social, religious, political, and economic difference. Once the War of Independence had concluded and the common enemy of Great Britain was defeated, there was some question as to whether it made sense for these rather disparate former colonies to remain together. For Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, and others, however, those differences could become a source of strength. The key would be to find ways to reconcile democracy and empire. At its core, the American school of empire was built on the idea that the differences between the states and

[1] The single most important recent book on the topic of empire in its modern incarnation is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, which also traces the advent of a modern idea of empire to the American Revolution. In literary scholarship, several important recent studies have taken up the question of empire in the literature and culture of the early United States, including Sean X. Goudie, *Creole America*; Andrew Doolen, *Fugitive Empire*; and David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*. Doolen has subsequently published a second study of writing about empire in early America entitled *Territories of Empire*. For an overview of the question of the changes taking place in historical analyses of the Revolution around the question of nation and empire, see the "Roundtable" on colonial history and national history in the *William and Mary Quarterly* 64(2)(April 2007).

their varied peoples would be the nation's greatest source of strength. While prejudices about race and ethnicity distorted those values, much as they did American ideas of freedom and democracy, we would do well to recover that narrative of the advantages of embracing heterogeneity both in the realm of individual identities and in the arena of public debate.

In particular, this study examines the way the novel and history painting, which filled a role analogous to the novel in painting, became crucial genres across the Atlantic world for the exploration of empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the classical world, poetry, of course, had been the medium for singing about the heroic and tragic unfolding of empires. And, as Suvir Kaul has recently shown, in the eighteenth century, poetry would continue to serve as an important venue where literary artists would think about the wages of empire.[2] Although American poets such as Philip Freneau and Joel Barlow would attempt to adapt that tradition to the US context, in the early United States the forms that were most profoundly shaped by the reemergence of empire were forms that were also new or renovated as vehicles for thinking about empire: the novel and history painting. The story of the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century is well known.[3] Regardless of which explanation for the emergence of the novel in English we subscribe to, its implication in the history of eighteenth-century empire is clear. From early British examples such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* to American counterparts such as *The Algerine Captive* and *The Pioneers,* the themes and narrative forms of the novel were shaped by the experience of a rapidly expanding world and its impact on the social, economic, and political life of the time.

The case of history painting, as we shall see more fully in Chapter 3, resembles that of the novel, but with some notable differences. Although it was not an invention of the eighteenth century in the way that the novel was, history painting underwent a profound transformation in the latter part of the century as it was championed by Sir Joshua Reynolds and reinvented and refashioned by Benjamin West. The form dated to at least the Renaissance, but it would not be until the late eighteenth century that it would become a venue focused intensely on the questions of empire.

[2] Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire.*

[3] The classic narrative of the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century is Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel.* Some of the more recent and important revisions include Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*; and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and, with Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan.*

Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley in London and Jacques Louis David in France, in particular, would lead the way, creating canvases that meditated on the challenges facing the British and French empires in the late eighteenth century. Once it developed its strong association with empire, the form became immensely popular in Britain, France, and the United States. The vogue for history painting lasted from the last three decades of the eighteenth century through, in the United States at least, the Civil War. History paintings, like novels, became popular art forms that were consumed by wide audiences. Painters would present major canvases, such as John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson* (1782–4), John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence* (1786–1819), and Emmanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), as public spectacles that attracted large crowds willing to pay to view these massive images. At the same time, printers sold engravings of popular works that people could then hang in their homes. Through these media, history paintings were seen by wide audiences, not unlike the readership of novels.

Popular forms dedicated to a broad, even encyclopedic engagement with the interplay between the individual and the social, novels and history paintings emerged as essential venues for the exploration of empire and its impacts on the people living under its aegis. The themes and challenges of empire would also manifest in poems, on the stage, and in other art forms in the Atlantic world, but the novel and history painting, forms that became increasingly popular over the course of the eighteenth century, served as crucial venues where the aesthetic, political, and social disruptions, transformations, and opportunities generated by empire could be explored. Another way to put this would be to say that the social and political problems of empire – negotiating heterogeneity, integrating multiple forms and voices, and generating coherence out of disparate materials – were also aesthetic challenges facing the novelist and history painter. In the eighteenth century, empire was not just a political idea, it was also a social and aesthetic one that permeated the culture.[4] Reinventing empire for the eighteenth-century transatlantic world therefore would be the work of the novelist and history painter as much as politicians, merchants, and other factors.

[4] For a pair of excellent examples of the central role an aesthetics of empire played in shaping eighteenth-century British art and literature, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*; and Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*.

A modern conception of empire was in the process of being formulated in the eighteenth century. The British looked to the examples of ancient Greece and Rome as they set about building their global commercial empire. The British model of empire that would evolve over the course of the eighteenth century (and continue to evolve for much of the nineteenth century) had a profound influence on American thinking. Through their experience as colonials, however, Americans developed their own version of republican empire. Whereas in its internal structure the British Empire in the eighteenth century was hierarchical and centralized, Americans would conceive of a model that would diffuse authority. For much of the second half of the eighteenth century, American colonial leaders would try to persuade the Crown and Parliament to loosen their hold on the reins and allow the colonies greater control over their own affairs. The goal was not to undermine the British Empire but rather to make it more efficient and more responsive to those on the peripheries – to integrate the colonies more fully into Great Britain rather than keeping them at a distance. The problem for American colonials wasn't that they didn't want to be a part of the British Empire; it was that they weren't being treated as full members of it.

The American Revolution, from this point of view, was the result of a disagreement between the imperial center and its American colonies about the organization and structure of empire rather than the inevitable consequence of the development of a distinct American national culture or identity. As the colonies developed over the course of the eighteenth century, American colonials became disenchanted with the Crown's periphery and center strategy and began to think about ways to create a less hierarchical model of empire. The Articles of Confederation and the US Constitution attempted to codify such a decentered approach to empire. Reacting to the experience of an overly centralized British imperial authority, early American political writers, novelists, and government officials sought to address the question of how to mediate between the twin pulls of nation and empire that were essential to the creation and organization of the relationship between the disparate peoples who formed the thirteen states.

The British-American conflict over empire began to articulate itself most obviously in the crises that developed as a result of the imposition of the Stamp Act and Townshend Duties in the 1760s. It would only accelerate in the 1770s as the Crown and Parliament refused to devolve power to colonial authorities. The conflicts often took the shape of disagreements over taxation, but the core question, as American officials repeatedly

emphasized, was about the distribution of political authority across the empire.[5] The Crown's intransigence put the Americans in a very difficult position because American colonials wished fervently to remain in the British Empire, a theme that recurs throughout this study. They admired British arts, industry, and science and wanted to see them flourish. They considered British culture to be the most advanced in the history of civilization and cherished the rights of Englishmen. American colonists in the thirteen colonies were proud to be members of the British Empire, which they believed to be the greatest and most advanced empire in the history of the world. These are themes they would touch on repeatedly in their pleas to the Crown and Parliament during the turbulent 1760s and 1770s.

One of the most daunting challenges for the thirteen colonies in their dispute with Great Britain and for the states when they decided to declare independence, a challenge that is at the core of both the Articles of Confederation and the US Constitution, was how to manage such a diverse and heterogeneous set of peoples. The category of the nation simply would not suffice when addressing the wide variety in religion, economy, ethnicity, and social mores that obtained in states as different as, for example, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The thirteen colonies had been settled quite differently, and their economies, populations, and political structures had evolved accordingly. The concept of empire, as it had developed in the eighteenth century, offered a ready solution to address the problem of managing these differences. But the desire for empire was not only a matter of necessity, it was also a question of preference. Americans, as Hamilton and Madison make clear in *The Federalist*, wanted to become an empire because that is what they knew and admired.

In many respects, those attitudes did not change after the Revolution. Although Americans were no longer part of the British Empire after

[5] These questions, however, had a significantly longer history. They had materialized in Massachusetts in the early part of the century with the dispute over Governor Edmund Andros, for example. They would emerge again during the Seven Years War, when colonials, including Benjamin Franklin, attempted to gain a greater voice in the administration of the colonies as looming conflicts with the French and the Native Americans tested the Crown and Parliaments' respective abilities to understand and manage the increasingly complicated affairs in North America. Both these examples represent moments when the core and periphery model came under pressure for its failure to account for the input and potential contributions of colonials to the administration of the Empire. For a fuller discussion of the Seven Years War and its crucial role in the story of empire in colonial British North America, see Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War*; and Timothy Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire*.

the War of Independence, they nonetheless remained in awe of British culture.[6] American intellectuals of all stripes would continue to look to London for leadership in the fields of literature, art, science, and politics well into the nineteenth, if not the twentieth century. While Americans were proud of their accomplishments in the political realm, they built their state and laws on the foundation of the British systems that they had cherished as colonials. Their aim was to improve on those models rather than reject them wholesale. The political and cultural history of the American Revolution for too long has emphasized the break with Great Britain and the rise of an American national culture. In recent years, however, the tide has turned, and scholars have become increasingly interested in the continuities between pre- and post-Revolutionary America as its people sought to negotiate the transition from British colonials to American nationals.[7] This is a book about one such continuity.

The United States has only recently begun to be understood to be an empire. For most of American history, the dominant view had been that the United States was by definition anti-imperial. It had been born of a struggle against the British Empire, and in the twentieth century it would stand in opposition to the communist empire of the Soviet Union. Only in the aftermath of the Cold War have American scholars begun to think more intensively about the United States as an empire. And even then, the usual argument is that the United States began as a nation and evolved into an empire as it became more powerful over the course of the nineteenth century. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's influential essay collection, *Cultures of US Imperialism*, and Kaplan's *Anarchy of Empire* established this imperial counternarrative for nineteenth-century American studies and contributed to the emergence of what has been dubbed Post-National American Studies. But the evidence of history attests that the United States was in fact conceived as an empire from the outset.

[6] On the continued American fascination with British culture and taste, see Philip Gould, *Writing the Rebellion*; Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English*; and Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia*.

[7] Several influential bodies of scholarship approach the eighteenth century in ways that seek to emphasize continuity over disruption, including most notably the Anglicization thesis, transatlantic studies, and hemispheric studies. Scholars working in these methodologies or thematic rubrics tend to think of ways that integrate the way colonial America and the United States developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into a larger story that encompasses broader flows of goods, people, and ideas. Instead of thinking of the United States as an exceptional or isolated case, these schools of thought emphasize the participation of the United States in and interdependence with a wider world.

The American School of Empire explores the contours of this American idea of empire as it took shape during the early decades of the republic both in political documents, such as the Articles of Confederation and US Constitution, and in the literature and art produced by American authors and painters, such as Royall Tyler, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, John Singleton Copley, and Samuel F. B. Morse. As with their corollaries in the political world, these artists wrestled with the young republic's separation from the British Empire and reinvention as an independent new world empire. A robust engagement with British notions of empire and, perhaps more important, the idea of the British Empire would continue to shape American art and literature long after the Revolution. The several chapters of this study take up that conversation to explore how various strands of an American school of empire developed in the first fifty years of the republic. To understand the politics and culture of the early United States, we must come to grips with the young republic's deep engagement with ideas of empire.

Although we can find one version of that conversation in the political debates over the Constitution, the novels and history paintings of the early United States wrestle more directly with the impact of these sometimes abstract questions on the social and personal level as well as the aesthetic level. Farmer James' agony at the end of Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) offers insights into the impact of empire on the family that far exceed anything that Brutus or Publius have to offer in their respective accounts of the US Constitution. At the same time, Crèvecoeur's strategy for constructing his semiautobiographical novel through a series of vignettes that span the regional variations in the colonies speaks immediately to the aesthetics of the union between the states. The play between independence and interdependence becomes the central thematic tension in the text that lends coherence to the diverse materials included in it. In a similar vein, Benjamin West's *The Departure of Regulus from Rome* (1772; see Figure 3.3) invites the viewer to weigh its protagonist's patriotism in relation to his obligations to his family. Reimagining history painting as a genre of empire, West stages a classical scene of imperial Rome to ask questions about the wages of empire. Both Crèvecoeur's and West's works ask where our allegiance to the state begins and ends? How do we negotiate between the local and the global in the context of an empire whose territory extends over vast and growing spaces? How can the state and the individual make sense of these spaces and imbue them with meaning? These were questions to which answers were only beginning to be formulated in the eighteenth century.

The meaning and shape of empire were changing rapidly over the course of the eighteenth century. For much of Europe, classical Rome stood as the historical standard. However, the Romans had been suspicious of commerce and had built their empire on the basis of military might. The British and their European rivals in France and the Netherlands in particular were pursuing a different kind of global commercial empire that combined military and economic expansion. This crucial difference, along with many other important cultural and social changes, required the builders of European empires and their critics to think and rethink how a modern global empire might thrive.[8] The challenges were enormous, and they were rarely addressed systematically or consistently. The British Crown mostly adopted an ad hoc approach to managing its empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, delegating authority to various corporate interests and individuals, along with some governmental bodies. This decentered approach to administering the empire spawned a variety of different perspectives and strategies that made for a lively debate about how to best manage the growing British Empire.[9] British politicians, intellectuals, and writers, from Lords North and Pitt to Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, argued about the best strategies for managing the expanding empire. Should London hold power tightly, or should administration of the empire be farmed out to local bodies on the ground? What role should creoles and colonials play in those local bodies? What would be the relationship between religious, economic, and political goals? We can see the British Empire experimenting with different approaches in South Asia, the Caribbean, and North America.

At the same time, the British Empire articulated itself both externally and internally. For decades, postcolonial theory has focused mostly on the external face of empire: how imperial powers subjugate and exploit racial and ethnic others culturally as well as militarily and economically. More recently, scholars such as Linda Colley, Ian Baucom, and Suvir Kaul, along with postcolonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, have turned their attention to

[8] On the long argument about empire in European political philosophy, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*. There is a burgeoning literature on the development of the British Empire in the eighteenth century that includes studies such as Linda Colley, *Britons*; and David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*.

[9] In *Territories of Empire*, Doolen shows that in its early years, the United States adopted a similar ad hoc strategy but would rethink its approach in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase.

the way that imperial relations shaped the internal social, political, economic, and cultural structures of Great Britain and of colonial entities more generally.[10] *The American School of Empire* studies the way an idea of empire organized US culture and politics from the inside. This is not, however, a study of the way Americans engaged in expansionist imperial policy or employed racial strategies toward blacks and Native Americans that partook of the same kind of racial and ethnic violence and colonizing discourse that their European counterparts had developed.[11] Instead, this book shows how an idea of empire, as a system or structure that enabled the state and the culture to manage a heterogeneous and complex series of peoples through a central organizing principle, was at the core of US politics and culture from the beginning.

One of the most striking tropes informing the US discourse of empire during these first fifty odd years of the republic was the metaphor of the family. From Crèvecoeur's Farmer James to West's depictions of Regulus and Aggripina and Cooper's semiautobiographical account of the founding of Cooperstown, American narratives of empire frequently turned to the family as a vehicle for thinking about the problems of cohesion, similarity and difference, and generational change that faced the young empire. As Jay Fliegelman demonstrated in *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, metaphors of the family were essential to early American narratives of education, government, independence, and revolution. The family, of course, represented the smallest version of the state, embodied in the classical model of the *pater familias*. The rejection of the logic of monarchy and its substitution with a system of democratic empire thus also entailed a rethinking of the structure of the family to correspond with new understandings of the circulation and exercise of power. The question for this more decentered American version of empire, then, would be how to mediate the relationship between this smallest unit of local self-regulation and the expansive but diffuse authority of the empire. At the same time, the family, as Crèvecoeur's and Cooper's respective narratives make clear, also contained the racial and ethnic logic of empire – a logic of blood ties that both these authors and the American empire would struggle to overcome.

[10] See Colley, *Britons* and *Prisoners*; Baucom, *Out of Place* and *Spectres of the Atlantic*; Hardt and Negri, *Empire* and *Multitude*; Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*; and Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

[11] For some examples of recent work that has taken up this question in the early United States, see Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*; Doolen, *Fugitive Empire* and *Territories of Empire*; and Goudie, *Creole America*.