

CHAPTER I

Introduction
Transitions

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For scholars and citizens alike, the period between 1770 and 1828 is generally acknowledged to be one of the most – if not *the* most – important eras in the political history of the United States. It was also for quite a long time something of a dead spot in literary scholarship. For better or for worse, the writing of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century United States has for generations been treated as relentlessly *minor*: formulaic novels, grim sermons, creaky plays, secondhand civic theory, and third-rate poetry that all suffer from comparison with contemporary writing in the British Isles, Continental Europe, and East Asia. The cultural moment may be crucial and the philosophical stakes high, but the texts that constitute it are best approached in the aggregate (or as popular myth and symbol) rather than in their details. Indeed, one could skip from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776) to James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and still tell a compelling story about the early republic: insofar as they foreground questions of democracy and liberal subjectivity, theorize the righteousness of settler colonialism and Manifest Destiny, and pass blithely over a whole host of structural inequalities in the name of imagining a new nation, Paine and Cooper yield up handy frameworks for explaining the literatures of this period all by themselves.

There are consequences to this sort of step-skipping. For our purposes in *American Literature in Transition, 1770–1828, Volume I*, the most important of these consequences is the illusion of historical smoothness, stability, or consensus. (This is what gives The Founding its capital-F and its definite article, for example, or designates a particularly complicated cultural period by the name of a particularly dreadful president, as in the “Age of Jackson.”) Of late, a sense of early republican rectitude has been particularly robust in the thinking of those on the ideological right, for whom the American Revolution and its aftermath present a vision of perfect probity and clarity. As the *Washington Post* pointed out in a story offering to decode the symbols on display during the storming of the US

Capitol on January 6, 2021, a number of “Trump allies and surrogates . . . referred to Jan. 6 as Republicans’ ‘1776 moment.’”¹ The Proud Boy-affiliated “1776.shop” website (now shuttered) sold ten different T-shirts with Revolutionary-era flag designs – not just the Gadsden flag (whose “Dont Tread on Me” has featured in the Tea Party’s iconography since its inception), but also the Pine Tree flag (with its Lockean “Appeal to Heaven”) and the flag of George Washington’s headquarters (thirteen stars on a blue field). Among more high-flown expressions of conservative fantasy, we might think of the Federalist Society’s expedient fiction of judicial originalism, which posits a frozen and fetishized Constitution – to be interpreted solely according to the putatively manifest “intent” of its original Framers – as a rationale for countering any and all non-regressive legislation. That such ideas are transparently fatuous – white-supremacist, historically vacant, and casting chauvinistic ignorance as a virtue – in no way diminishes their power.

The appeal of Revolutionary-era dates and symbols for the American right is straightforward: How better to frame a ruthlessly partisan and utterly contemporary ideology than with a veneer of almost universally acclaimed “tradition”? How better to recall a cultural moment in which power and property accrued more or less exclusively to white men? That said of course, linking the early republic with righteous simplicity has never been an activity limited to conservatives. For instance, we might think of Mary Antin, a Jewish immigrant whose family moved to Boston from Belarus in the late nineteenth century. Enrolled in a public school, Antin found herself drawn irretrievably to the figure of George Washington: she wrote poems about him, gave speeches about him, and fabricated a new “American” subjectivity in what she cast as his likeness. For Antin, whose life’s work consisted in public advocacy for Progressive causes – particularly those related to the treatment of immigrants and the alleviation of poverty – Washington served as a kind of paragon of radical equality, proof that birth and worth were in no way correlated. “I had relatives and friends who were notable people by the old standards . . . but this George Washington, who died long before I was born, was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens.”² Washington may have done special things, but his most important act was his participation in the republic; his greatness affirms the possibility of *her* greatness – and of everyone’s. It’s not at all surprising that Washington’s ambivalent relationship to slavery (including his own enslavement of several hundred people at Mt. Vernon) doesn’t come up in Antin’s account; neither does his role in the displacing of Indigenous peoples. Washington is a radiant and

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uncomplicated hero for Antin, whose static iconicity – impressed ad infinitum on every quarter (since 1932) and every dollar bill (off and on since 1869) – remains part of the fabric of US life.

Broadly, then: people occupying a vast range of positions on the political spectrum have long associated the turn of the nineteenth century with a kind of prelapsarian rectitude or *certainty* – it was a time before all of the trouble started, whatever that trouble might be. The all-too-recent *1776 Commission Report* – produced by the Trump administration partly in response to Nikole Hannah-Jones’s *1619 Project* for the *New York Times* – frames a particularly acidulous version of consensus historiography: “The facts of our founding are not partisan. They are a matter of history. Controversies about the meaning of the founding can begin to be resolved by looking at the facts of our nation’s founding. Properly understood, these facts address the concerns and aspirations of Americans of all social classes, income levels, races and religions, regions and walks of life.”³ Breathtaking tautology aside, this notion that all “controversies” about the first years of the United States require resolution into a singular “proper” and universally applicable understanding – and that such resolutions would be the natural and inevitable outcome of “looking at the facts” – is, of course, both absurd and dangerous. Historical “fact” is not a kind of fossil, to be pulled up glittering and self-evident from the ooze, always already primed for integration into a stable explanatory system that confirms the justness and inevitability of the present. The pastness of the past doesn’t mean that it all makes perfect sense; it should be no more totalizable than the now.

In the spirit of resisting consensus history and making space for new and better ways of imagining the American project, this volume rejects grand narratives in favor of the contingent, the provisional, the temporary. There is always more to do and say about this (or any) set of cultural moments; *American Literature in Transition, 1770–1828, Volume 1*, is not designed to be the last word on the early Republic, but rather a set of provocations, landmarks, or models for future inquiry. Hence, the titular emphasis on “transition”: in what follows, we describe a field that is constantly changing and, with it, a shifting landscape of questions, archives, foci, and more. We take as a starting assumption a belief in the possibilities of unknowing, a sense of the importance of exploring – without explaining away – the vast range of opacities that have shaped what and how we think about the United States. And insofar as new areas of uncertainty are often the progenitors of new methods, new histories, and new archives, the aspiration of this volume is not *more*

certainty but rather a closer and more molecular perspective on the period's knottier historical problems.

Many silent transitions inform what we have tried to do here. In a traditional historiographic sense, this period is perhaps the most obviously transitional of the four volumes in the series. The years 1770–1828 encompass the shift from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the shift from a colonial to an early national or republican period, the shift from locally concentrated authority to something like federal governance, and the shift from manuscript and manually operated printing technologies to something nearing industrial print production. But there are a great many more moving parts: we have attempted, in this collection, to move at least sporadically away from these received political and historical frameworks in order to think about how else we might see and understand the literature of this period. Sometimes, that means centering new texts or other objects of study; at other points, it means developing underexamined networks of production, reception, and engagement. In all cases, we hope this volume (and the series that it commences) will pose larger questions about what American literature – a phrase that, at best, describes a loose, unwieldy conglomerate of print, manuscript, and other material sources – was, is, and could be.

Accordingly, the essays in this volume take as axiomatic the intransigent messiness of the period. The early republic was a moment without a monoculture. There were scores of languages spoken, Indigenous and Indo-European and African; there were also syncretic mixes, like Gullah and Louisiana Creole. Even among anglophone white folks, there were significant regional barriers to communication. (This is why Noah Webster gets so wound up about an American English dictionary in the late eighteenth century – he perceives the need to *make* a unitary American language, not the need to record it.) There was considerable economic disparity, and a great deal of conversation about whether mercantile or agricultural interests ought to claim precedence in the affairs of the republic. There was religious difference, too; Judaism, Catholicism, Quakerism, Protestant Congregationalism, African Methodist Episcopalianism, Charismatic Pentecostalism, Yoruba, Islam, and an irreducible variety of indigenous faiths shared space (if not equal power) under the federal tent. Most importantly, some people were enslaved and others were free; some people claimed the right to displace others for the purposes of capitalist enclosure. The ceaseless structural conflict framed by the interested fictions of white supremacy and Manifest Destiny meant that there could never be such a thing as a singular Early Republic.

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The collection features essays on classic topoi of the Founding as well as on issues that have garnered increasingly sustained scholarly attention but that still cannot claim the centrality to the field as a whole that we think they merit: Hispanophone and other non-Anglophone literatures, disability aesthetics and analytics, queer care, and the origins of white supremacist cultures in the United States.⁴ Still: there are just as many fields and subfields, geographies and questions that are *not* represented in what follows. Curating a collection of essays that purports to represent five complex decades not only lends itself to but actually *requires* omissions, absences, and gaps. We have sought to represent a wide spectrum of archives, sources, methods, and genres in a critical stance that announces a belief in the pedagogical value of exposure and assemblage over cohesion. But we have also tried our best to set up useful conversations among the pieces. To that end, we have loosely organized the essays that follow into three broad fields, in an effort to corral what we believe are some of the unique contributions of this volume into frameworks – some very traditional to literary criticism, others less so – that showcase some of the current transitions in the study of the literatures of the early United States. What we hope will emerge from this volume are questions: difficult, unresolved, but newly thinkable with the help of the essays it contains – a generative and deeply interesting cacophony instead of a triumphal march.

Form and Genre

Part I of the book is devoted to essays that might be said to turn on questions of expressive form. A great deal of important writing from the time of the Founding falls outside of now-conventional parameters of literary art: we thus seek to acknowledge and celebrate the considerable formal diversity of the period. Indeed, it's hard to overstate the richness and variety of literary and para-literary texts in the early Republic; people consumed daily and weekly newspapers and monthly magazines; they bought English and Continental imprints as well as American ones; they sent each other letters and assembled common-place books; they wrote and read almanacs and catechisms and political histories and natural histories and cookbooks and dictionaries and murder ballads and political pamphlets and hymnals and missals and philosophical essays and novels and poems and satires and on and on. The essays in this section are meant to suggest angles of approach to this multitude; although the techniques

they deploy and the conclusions they draw might be quite distinct, they share a commitment to the possibilities of generic reading.

We begin with documents involved in the creation of the state. In “The Law of Form and the Form of the Law,” Matthew Garrett takes up the rhetorical niceties critical to instantiating a democracy in which the actual power of the people is radically curtailed. Moving through the series of documents that amount to the bureaucratic Founding of the United States (the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the US Constitution, *The Federalist*), he shows how a propertied elite arrogated sovereignty to itself under the sign of representative government burdened with a “responsibility” to the People – those abstracted guarantors of moral and political authority – instead of a crass accountability to actual squabbling and (as the elite imagined them) unwashed constituents.

Even if the notion of the People was a useful fiction for constraining actual demotic power, speaking to the public mattered a great deal. The idea that governmental action relied on securing the appearance of popular consent meant that the ancient arts of charisma and rhetorical persuasion claim a new and remarkable importance in the project of holding the United States together. Sandra Gustafson’s examination of the genre of the “The Statesman’s Address” considers the early republican interest in the potency of the spoken word, exploring the remarkable continuities between neoclassical aesthetics, religious revivalism, and Indigenous diplomacy. This dynamic becomes especially vivid in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Gustafson argues, with the recording and wide dissemination of congressional debates; the cultural elevation of men like Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun on the basis of their rhetorical ability is an essential part of the fantasy of the United States as a deliberative polity.

In another turn on the relationship between language and hegemony, Sean Harvey uses Indigenous vocabularies to isolate and specify some of the stakes of linguistic study under the conditions of settler colonialism. Among the parties devoted to the work of recording Native American languages and translating them into English were traders, missionaries, government administrators, and natural philosophers. As such a list might suggest, no matter what form the collection of words took, the results were far from neutral – with consequences both intimate and global. A knowledge of Native speech might be used to press a commercial advantage, convert a “heathen” soul to Christianity, seize a territory, or build a Eurocentric theory of human cultural evolution. Critically, though,

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these word lists can also frame facets of Indigenous resistance and perseverance in the face of assimilationist or exterminationist fantasies. (For a companionate claim about Indigenous oratorical traditions, see Lopenzina's essay below.)

The next three chapters shift to a consideration of belletristic forms. Thomas Koenigs's "The Genteel Novel in the Early United States" explores late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century attempts to reframe fictional entertainments as essential ideological tools. Although the genre of the novel had often been treated as dangerous in the eighteenth century – as the sort of thing that put bad ideas in the heads of readers, that encouraged sympathy for or identification with the vicious and depraved – Koenigs shows how early US novelists leveraged suspicions about the form and about gentility itself to imagine or consolidate something like an aristocracy of virtue disarticulated from an aristocracy of wealth. That is, the novel becomes a crucial site both for testing definitions of "refinement" and "virtue" and – at least in theory – for metacognitive thinking about how fiction might inculcate those ideas into an irregularly educated and unevenly distributed population.

The next essays continue in a similarly demotic vein. Heather Nathans's "The State of Our Union: Comedy in the Post-Revolutionary US Theater" finds in comic stage performance an overlooked archive for reading social tensions in the postwar moment – especially those tensions related to the absurdities of racial and class inequality. American theater audiences in the last decades of the eighteenth century were extremely keen on comedies of manners, whether by British or American playwrights, especially those that mobilized cultural otherness as part of the humor. At a time when the playhouse was perhaps the most important setting for popular entertainment, the runaway success on the American stage of stock figures like the fop, the bumpkin, and the ethnic "type" makes concrete – and often ironizes – the broader power relations that structure the culture. Along these same popular lines, in "'To assume her Language as my own': The Revival Hymn and the Evangelical Poetess in the Early Republic," Wendy Roberts explores the contours of pietistic poetry produced by women in the late colonial and post-Revolutionary eras. Deeply conventional and so ubiquitous as to be more or less invisible to scholars, gendered hymnody has not often been considered worthy of extended critical attention. For Roberts, however, these poems document the necessarily aesthetic nature of Protestantism; the ecstasies of belief rendered in verse by various Poetesses are key to understanding the lived religion of the First and Second Great Awakenings. Roberts also locates in the poems of Phillis

Wheatley Peters a vital critique of the figure of the totalizing (and implicitly white) Evangelical Poetess. Wheatley Peters's refusal to produce the hymns that the dominant culture expected of poetically inclined women – in favor, for example, of neoclassical epyllia – coupled with her unconventional adaptations of some of hymnody's signature tropes, puts her at the center of an anti-white-supremacist tradition.

Part I concludes with a literary look at foodways. Elizabeth Hopwood's "Ambiguities and Little Secrets: Taste-Making and the Rise of the American Cookbook" takes up the ideological complexity of early republican cookbooks, finding in recipes and their framing a vision of domestic tranquility dependent on the mystification of enslaved labor and international trade. Commodities such as ginger and sugar came to market denuded of the whole bloody history of their cultivation and preparation; cookbooks stand as manuals for recasting extractive processes in terms of a wholesome narrative of sustainability, feminine capability, and household independence. If there is no practical separation in the household manual between the government of the kitchen and the government of the polity, then the stakes of baking are quite high; the house is not merely a metaphorical "little commonwealth" but a critical site for the fantasies that sustain the big commonwealth itself.

Networks

Shifting from an emphasis on genre to an emphasis on the conditions of production, we have organized Part II around the idea of the network – the dynamic interconnection between people, geographies, texts, and cultural infrastructures. This is not, itself, a new idea. Scholars from Lisa Brooks to Michael Warner, Caroline Wigginton to Joseph Rezek have all, and quite differently, taken as a point of departure the critical importance of networks to various sorts of cultural production: history, print, letters, and diplomacy. Scholarship in book history, in particular, has emphasized the immense influence of networks on the production and circulation of print and manuscript materials. Recent work in Black and Indigenous studies has charted the critical importance of networks for a wide range of technologies of communication – from periodicals to oratory, sermons to songs, novels to "true histories," craftwork to print. These networked technologies, in turn, become central to fugitivity, negotiation, political consciousness-raising, and collective resistance.⁵

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The contributors to this part of the volume – Emily García, Drew Lopenzina, Anna Mae Duane, John Mac Kilgore, and Kirsten Lee – all build on the importance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century networks to fascinating and innovative ends. Each of these pieces has a distinct archive and a different aim, but they share an appreciation of relationality – be it local, regional, or circumatlantic. Framing the means and modes of the *circulation* of ideas as vital corollaries to the ideas themselves, these essays foreground the intricate mediations at the center of early Republican sociability.

The section begins with Kilgore’s “Modern Bigotry: The War for the Ohio, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Settler Colonial Imagination in the Early Republic,” which shows how networks of print entertainment, political influence, and armed resistance became absolutely indispensable to the emergence of a consolidated white identity and the attendant growth of shared white supremacist and settler colonial sentiment. These networks, Kilgore argues, structured the arrangements of power both within and between regions, and stretched from the so-called frontiers to the metropolises. Reading well-studied writers such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge in light of these networks allows connections between distant locations and seemingly unrelated political conflicts (here, the United States wars against the United Indian Nations and the Whiskey Rebellion) to come into focus, and brings into relief facets of some of these texts that might be otherwise difficult to trace.

It is also possible to read these colonialist networks against the grain. As Drew Lopenzina details in his essay, “‘This Politick Salvage’: Defining an Early Native American Literary Aesthetics,” the extensive textual records of British settler colonial violence – in the form of travel writings, colonial reports, and natural histories – also document Indigenous diplomacy. Lopenzina follows a particular tropology through white accounts of diplomatic relations, noting that settlers often represented Indigenous peoples as exceedingly politically savvy while consistently remarking on the unlikelihood that they could be politically savvy at all. He names this representational technique “*unwitnessing*,” a rhetorical mode in which the very thing being commented upon for some pragmatic purpose of exposition must then be repeatedly and forcefully retracted to serve prevailing colonial ideologies of conquest.” As an example, Lopenzina points us to the unwitting account of the widespread Native understanding of the “common pot,” or agreement to shared, negotiated use of land, that appears in George Washington’s description of a speech he attended by the Seneca orator Tanaghrisson in 1754. While Washington seems unable to

understand the oratory as an elaboration of Native-settler politics, we can see precisely the kinds of diplomacy of which Indigenous communities were imagined to be incapable.

The rewards of this attention to circulation, across and among regions and historical periods, are not merely the richness and specificity that comes with historical detail. Indeed, as Emily García argues in her essay, “Logics of Exchange and the Beginnings of US Hispanophone Literature,” the particularity of *place* significantly affects the tools of literary composition – metaphor, imagery and other tropes, and political and economic logic – that in turn shape the content of the work. “Logics of Exchange” focuses on bilingual Hispanophone writers and printers in Philadelphia, a city with a flourishing print industry and with mercantile ties to both the Spanish Caribbean and Central America. Taking up this political economy, García argues, we are better able to draw out what she terms the “logics of exchange” of early nineteenth-century Hispanophone print.

Focusing on networks, as opposed to single authors, also allows us to repurpose old questions to new ends. Indeed, sustained focus on the connections between writers, printers, and thinkers – especially when scholars take a durational approach to these communities, examining them over the span of decades – allows previously un- or underexamined features of their conversations to come into view. In her essay, “The Emigrationist Turn in Black Anti-Colonizationist Sentiment,” Kirsten Lee’s attention to Black periodicals – newspapers produced by Black writers and editors for an intended Black audience – exposes some of the more granular politics informing debates about the resettlement of free and enslaved Black Americans in Liberia, Sierra Leone, or elsewhere. Her careful consideration of these intracommunity dialogues, rather than relying exclusively on writings by proponents or members of the (white-founded and white-led) American Colonization Society, allows a more nuanced perspective on the public reception of back-to-Africa efforts – all too often the choice of well-meaning white abolitionists and white enslavers alike. What this research reveals is that Black skepticism about resettlement elsewhere provided the foundations for Black separatist movements aimed at founding Black-governed and Black-populated communities *inside* the United States and Canada. By drawing readerly attention to the subtleties of these conversations – between white and Black proponents of colonization, Black proponents and opponents of colonization, and distinctions between colonizationist versus emigrationist political visions – the intellectual work