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From Colony to Republic: Building the American Nation

Deborah L. Madsen

The United States as we know it today is the result of a long history of territorial acquisition. At the time of European contact in the late fifteenth century North America was home to thousands of indigenous tribal communities. What followed was a lengthy process of conquest, genocide, and annexation as European colonial powers established settlements that became the continental United States. Consequently, the "America" referenced in a seventeenth-century literary text is different to that found in an eighteenth-century work, and even in a nineteenth-century text what is referred to as "America" or the United States probably is not what we envision from a twenty-first century perspective. Therefore, this account of the emergence of the American nation begins with an overview of the process of territorial expansion that formed the contemporary nation-state.

The English hegemony of early America was established with the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1763) which displaced French and Spanish colonial interests east of the Mississippi. At the time of the Revolution, the Thirteen British Colonies comprised Georgia, the Carolinas (North and South), Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. What later became Maine was at that time part of Massachusetts; further to the north Nova Scotia was held by the British and the Hudson Bay region was claimed by both Britain and France; France held territory to the east of Nova Scotia as New France and south of the Great Lakes as French Louisiana; New Spain occupied the area south of and including what is now Texas. As the United States expanded westward in the course of the nineteenth century, anxieties became acute concerning the need to sustain the Anglicized character of American culture (particularly against Spanish influences) while at the same time developing a distinctive American culture. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 brought into the United States all territories from the 49th parallel to the Gulf of Mexico; Florida was ceded by Spain in 1819; Britain ceded the Oregon Territory in 1846; Texas was annexed in 1845 and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which brought the Mexican-American War to an end, together with the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, completed the acquisition of the entire continental United States. By 1912 the forty-eight mainland states comprised the nation-state. Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867; Hawai'i was annexed in 1898: both became U.S. states in 1959. As these various land acquisitions with their communities (both indigenous and settler) were incorporated into the U.S. the tensions that characterized literary representations of America from the beginning were heightened. The dominance of English-language literature, in the British tradition but expressive of an American national sensibility, remains at issue in debates concerning American multiculturalism and transnational cultural relations.

The first European literary texts to reference North America are the Norse sagas *The Saga of Eric the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, dating from around 1000AD. The permanent European colonization of the Americas began with Columbus's voyage of 1492; the English followed when John Cabot and his sons were awarded a royal patent by Henry VII in 1496 to seek a trade route to the Indies. The early exploration literature introduced to metropolitan writers a symbolic vocabulary that was extensively used in texts ranging from Edmund Spenser's allegorical epic *The Faerie Queene* (1590) to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611). The Jamestown colony in Virginia, which was founded in 1607, became the second

successful European settlement in North America, following the Spanish settlement of St Augustine, in Florida, in 1565. Captain John Smith's writings, particularly *A Description of New England* (1616) and *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles* (1624) were influential promotional narratives that encouraged further English migration to North America by emphasizing the abundance of New World nature. Where earlier narratives published by men like Hakluyt were focussed upon promoting a political will to colonize America, Smith helped to inaugurate a long-standing style of promotional writing that was aimed at potential immigrants rather than investors. The second important English colony in North America, at Plymouth in Massachusetts, was settled in 1620 for primarily religious reasons. The Plymouth region was located outside the charter granted the Virginia Company and, in response to the potential absence of legitimate governing structures, the company signed the Mayflower Compact almost immediately upon landing. In some respects, the Mayflower Compact was a precursor to John Winthrop's sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity," which he preached on board the *Arbella* in 1630 to the first group of Puritan colonists who were bound for Boston. These texts establish a colonial style of writing that culminates in the core documents of the American republic: the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution.

Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity" not only sets out the terms of the social compact into which the colonists entered; he also explains what is at stake in this venture. He uses the now famous image of the colony as "a Citty upon a Hill" to describe their experiment in Christian theocracy upon which the eyes of the world will be fixed. If they should succeed in creating a perfectly reformed Church then all the blessings of this world and the next will be upon them. Should they fail, however, they will become more than a global laughing stock: they will have failed to bring about the latest phase of a sacred history that has been unfolding since the creation. Winthrop's image of the city upon a hill refers to the three historical locations central to this history: the holy city of Jerusalem, Calvin's city of Geneva, and the city that is to come in Massachusetts. This future scene, like its symbolic predecessors, will be the scene of revelation, Winthrop suggests. He interprets the future anticipated by the colonists through the lens of scripture, seeing the Puritan New World as the fulfillment of prophecies laid down in the symbolic texture of the Old and New Testaments. This mode of scriptural interpretation, known as typology, dates back to the earliest interpretations of the New Testament and was common in the seventeenth century. Typology was favored among New England colonists who explained the hardships they faced (disease, starvation, Indian attacks) in terms of tests sent by God to prove their worthiness of the exceptional destiny assigned to them. The popular genre of colonial captivity narratives, the best-known of which is perhaps Mary Rowlandson's *Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), made extensive use of this typological rhetoric. Among Winthrop's contemporaries he was interpreted as the fulfillment of biblical promises that a leader would emerge to lead persecuted Puritans out of Anglican-dominated England into a Promised Land. Like Moses leading his people out of bondage in Egypt into the freedom of Canaan, so Winthrop was interpreted as a liberating agent of God and Massachusetts was his Canaan. Consequently, the initial generations of settlers saw their community as a divinely ordained "errand into the wilderness." This dominant view persisted despite the failure of Cromwell's Puritan Commonwealth and the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660 and has come to be called "American exceptionalism": the idea that the New World (and specifically that part of it which became the United States) has been singled out above all nations for a distinctive destiny.

New World exceptionalism was legitimated and supported by the assumption that North America represented a land of opportunity: economic opportunity for the landless of Europe and religious opportunity for those who sought a haven from persecution. In fact,

from the early colonial period both sets of assumptions were false: Puritans persecuted the Quakers of the Pennsylvania colony and the Catholics of Maryland, for instance, and land was increasingly concentrated in the hands of wealthy settlers through the operation of land grants. We can see in this history a distinction between the actual conditions of life and the mythologizing of the New World, in which literature played a key role. Colonial literature offered an interpretive medium or lens through which the meaning of everyday life could be read in providential or exceptionalist terms. In typological texts the contrast or conflict between the real and the ideal could be reconciled.

American exceptionalism has proved to be a long-lived national mythology, especially when represented in the form of the "American Dream." The Statue of Liberty, which marks the 1876 centenary of the Declaration of Independence, for example, was designed to welcome immigrants arriving by sea from Europe. The inscription inside the base of the statue, Emma Lazarus's sonnet "The New Colossus," designates the torch-bearing woman as "Mother of all Exiles." The poem concludes:

"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

(Lazarus, 1876: n.p.).

This notion of North America as a haven for the landless and the persecuted was a theme, from the early colonial period onward, in promotional writings that aimed to encourage migration. The promise that hard work will be rewarded with material affluence is repeated in promotional rhetoric throughout the colonial period and provides the structuring principle in one of the major texts of republican nationalism: Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (written between 1771 and 1788).

Franklin links his own success both to nurture and nature: to his embrace of the values of common sense, practicality, and industry, and also to his descent from a line of religious dissenters. His family legacy is represented as a willingness to rebel against injustice, an insistence upon self-determination, and a passionate commitment to freedom. These same qualities are attributed, in the *Autobiography*, to the fledgling American nation. The narrative is structured in such a way that Franklin emerges as a model citizen of the new republic. In the third of his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur asks "What is an American?" Benjamin Franklin offers an answer: he begins life as a colonist and subject of the British Crown yet dies a citizen of his own nation; he is born into poverty and obscurity but becomes wealthy and internationally famous. Franklin offers himself not only as an exemplary American. The didactic tone of the narrative is directed towards a reader who is encouraged to follow Franklin's model and to avoid that offered by characters who fail to meet the demands of the new nation: such as the incompetent, cheating printer Samuel Keimer, who eventually moves to Barbados.

Where Franklin describes a New World that offers opportunity he acknowledges that not everyone is capable of realizing the advantages offered to them. In contrast, Crèvecoeur's initial description of the new American citizen evokes a much more compelling image of what he calls "the great American asylum" (1782: 68). Crèvecoeur moves quickly to the issue of how a settler population, derived from all the nations of Europe, can be transformed into a nation. Though the Treaty of Paris (1763) had paved the way for the creation of an English nation-state, it is in the multi-national context of continental North America that Crèvecoeur

invents the image of the "melting pot" to describe the unique national qualities of the American:

> *He* is an American, who by leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Almer Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world (70).

The absence of aristocracy, the availability of land to be farmed, and above all the democratic republican government of America provide the foundation for the new national character. Crèvecoeur imagines the demographic emergence of "the American" through inter-marriage among people of many nations. However, the problem of defining what an American is in the present rather than the future is much more difficult. The frontiersmen to the west, and southern slavery, together with the fearful imminence of Revolution and anarchic warfare, complicate the myth of national innocence by exposing an ugly historical context. Crèvecoeur describes an ambivalent national character: the political and moral values represented as distinctively American in colonial writings bore a debatable relation to American demography.

Much of the literature of the revolutionary period emphasized independence as separation from Britain. Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787), for example, sets up a series of unflattering comparisons between American patriots and English-influenced dandies. However, the play betrays one of the deep contradictions of early republican literature: while the U.S. had rejected English government and national identity, there was no distinctive "American" culture with which to replace it. Consequently, literature of the early national period tends to favor exaggerated nationalist content rather incongruously expressed in literary forms that are derived from metropolitan English models. Tyler's play is a case in point: he uses the dramatic structure of Richard Sheridan's *A School for Scandal*, which was first performed in London in 1777, but "Americanizes" the subject matter. Joel Barlow's *The Hasty Pudding*, a satirical mock-epic after the fashion of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of Lock* (1712), is another example of this literary contradiction. The desire for a national literature was strong; early nationalists were aware that they lacked a culture that would match the political innovations represented by U.S. democracy. However, this claim that the United States lacked a sufficient history to support an independent national literature has been put into question by scholars such as Cathy Davidson, Lawrence Buell, Nina Baym, and Jay Fliegelman, and more recently by Teresa Goddu's work on American Gothic, Bruce Burgett's study of liberalism and republicanism, and Eve Allegra Raimon's work on the figure of the tragic mulatta. To this body of work we could add Malini Johar Schueller's important work on postcolonial contexts for early American literature.

All question the assumption that early literary expressions of nationalism are characterized by a plain style of expression that conveys the self-evident truths or common-sense valued in revolutionary writings: paradigmatic of which is Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776). Rather, this style and its reception is treated in the manner of the interpretive lens I mentioned above, as a cultural form that disguises myth as truth. Early American literature has benefitted from the foundational status acquired in this way; but early writers have also suffered as less-than-literary national institutions. William Spengemann notes this in his revisionist effort to define the concept of a national American literature in such a way that the value of colonial writers can be appreciated. Spengemann argues that the body of pre-revolutionary literature is too easily dismissed as neither American nor good literature

because of the narrow parameters that are applied to it. Rather, by resisting the urge to evaluate these texts by the standard of a national U.S. culture that had yet to come into being, critics can see colonial literature as "an important phase in the evolution of the language that conditions all of our literary and historical judgments" (1994: x).

The language of democratic republicanism is the focus of Bruce Burgett's revisionary efforts as he reads a variety of early texts, from George Washington's "Farewell Address" to the sentimental narratives of Hannah Foster and Harriet Jacobs. Burgett is interested in the ways in which sentiment, the embodied experience of a reader who is also a citizen-subject, binds the individual to the idea of democratic self-government. The Enlightenment ideals of rationality and reason that underpin democratic political theory were critiqued by popular early American novelistic forms: particularly sentimental fiction and Gothic novels. Teresa Goddu isolates one of the basic issues confronting the American Gothic: that "it is an historical mode operating in what appears to be an historical vacuum" (1997: 9). However, through her analysis of the Gothic as a style that returns obsessively to a repressed history, she contests an American literary canon that has been constructed to obscure this reality of U.S. imperial history. It is this history that the American Gothic engages in contrast to that found in the European Gothic style. As Charles Brockden Brown observes in the preface to *Edgar Huntley* "incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable" to the American context than superstition, haunted castles, and ghosts (1799: 3).

This emphasis upon repressed histories, twinned with a sensationalist or sentimental style of writing, is applied to the issue of commercial republicanism in Brockden Brown's novel *Arthur Mervyn* (1800). This narrative, through a symbolic interplay between "gold fever" and an outbreak of "yellow fever," takes up the debate about the place of commerce within the new Republic: whether it will inhibit the development of a U.S. culture by promoting greed rather than egalitarian republican ideals. Commercial republicanism had replaced the earlier agrarian ideal celebrated by Crevècoeur. The idea that in the free *laissez faire* market the pursuit of individual self-interest will serve the public good raised the spectre of conflict between economic interests and civic duty.The civilizing potential of commerce was placed in contrast with the national cost of commercial endeavours. This contrast was especially acute in relation to slavery, where individual economic self-interest proved insufficient to protect rights and liberty.

Race, and especially slavery, haunts the popular early republican form of the Gothic novel, which was instrumental in the development of the early American novel. Slavery was seen as a regional (Southern) rather than national issue, though it also worked to define by opposition (South versus North) the nature of the new nation. This tension between region and nation is not reserved for the Gothic; in his classic study of the American historical romance (1987), George Dekker traces the influence of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*-model upon the romance tradition, from the work of James Fenimore Cooper onwards. Dekker identifies a characteristic dynamic or tension between the universalizing, nationalizing impulse on the one hand and regionalizing pressures on the other; the forces of historical progress and reaction shape the contours of what for Dekker emerges as an ambivalent genre. In her study, *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited*, Eve Allegra Raimon attends to what she calls "the nation's long struggle to delineate racial boundaries" (Year: 1) and the racial tensions between region and nation that this struggle seeks to repress. In her account of antislavery fiction, Raimon positions her reading across racial boundaries, refusing a black versus white categorization that she perceives as a false representation of U.S. culture.

While some scholars like Raimon seek to reinscribe the absent black presence at the founding of white American literature (in a style encouraged by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*), others look to transnational and postcolonial contexts for the emergence of a national American literature. In their introduction to *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and*

Early American Literature, Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts suggest that whether accounts of American nationhood present a triumphal narrative of democracy and liberty or, instead, an apology for the hegemonic exercise of power that created a nation by genocide and enslavement, both approaches "unwittingly share a vision of the 'nation' as inalterably consolidated by the sheer fact of white settlement, ignoring the complex ways that 'Americanness' as a gendered, raced, and classed phenomenon was constantly negotiated through strategic identification and disidentification with Europeans, on the one hand, and American Indians, African-Americans, and other non-white populations, on the other hand" (2003: 2). Raimon's work can be located within this effort to shift the interpretation of U.S. nationhood away from a dominant white paradigm.

A similar effort has been directed at representations of gender and the role of women in the early Republic, starting with the assumption that the Enlightenment thought that gave rise to revolutionary concepts of liberty and democracy was emphatically masculinist. The concept of "Republican motherhood" was proposed by Linda Kerber in 1980 to describe the ideology of feminine patriotism that emerged during and in the years following the Revolution. This idea was based on the perception that women are well-placed to teach the values of republicanism to their children and to nurture civic-minded husbands and sons. Here again, the spectre of race returns to complicate the image: republican mothers were necessarily white bourgeois women because of the racial differentiation of femininity prescribed by slavery. Republican motherhood or domestic republicanism is seen by some as the precursor to what Barbara Welter (1960) has dubbed the "cult of True Womanhood." This gender stereotype, influential through the nineteenth century, valorized piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, and featured in feminine characterization particularly in sentimental novels. The value of purity was emphasized throughout the early republican period as the value most important to sustain the reproduction of white bourgeois citizens. Female purity, expressed as chastity, would ensure the purity of the national bloodstock and soothe anxieties about miscegenation. The racial identity of those coming into the new nation was policed by immigration and naturalization laws that controlled the racial nature of the national body politic: from the Naturalization Act of 1790, which set out the terms of citizenship for free white persons of good moral character, to the McCurrran-Walters Act of 1952.

The best-known example of the domestic novel of sentiment remains Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) but the style has its roots in eighteenth-century reactions to Enlightenment rationality. Sentimentalism presented a new view of human nature which prized feeling over thinking, passion over reason, and personal instincts of pity, tenderness, and benevolence over social or civic duties. The sentimental heroine is typically sympathetic to others, to nature, and to social morality; her feelings and instincts are prioritized over thought, reason, and duty. The first American best-seller was Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791): the story of a naive, impressionable, sentimental heroine who is persuaded to abandon her virtue by her teacher, the Frenchwoman Mademoiselle La Rue; her seducer is Lieutenant Montraville: in their names American innocence is contrasted with European worldliness, corruption, and decadence. From a broadly republican perspective, the novel warns of the dangers of the sexual double-standard for women: Charlotte loses her social standing, is abandoned, succumbs to illness and poverty, and eventually dies in childbirth. This kind of sentimental fiction was criticized for obscuring the dangers of unrestrained imagination and for promoting subjective fantasy. Texts like *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and the sequel *Lucy Temple* (1828) offer a contrast with the religious impulses that structure Susan Warner's later sentimental novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1851).

The effort to construct a national literature has undergone close interrogation in terms of the racial, gendered, and class assumptions that prescribe the story of national formation

told by literary history. The relationship between print culture and national formation itself has been the object of Trish Loughran's important work, especially *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building* (2007). Loughran has challenged the assumption that literature -- or printed texts more generally -- is centrally important to the development of national identity. While literature in the wider sense of printed texts provided a means of national formation for "great men," the mass of people had more limited access to this print culture. Consequently, Loughran questions the extent to which narratives of American national formation have been based on texts that promote an image of the nation in terms of liberal rights and democratic freedoms. While foundational texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were of paramount importance to the political and legislative construction of the United States, the degree to which all Americans were interested and able to participate in this creation of the nation is questioned. The story of U.S. nationalism is a universalizing narrative, she suggests, that was not experienced in the same way by people of different regions within the new nation, of different classes, degrees of education, race, and gender. Loughran provides an essential corrective to prescriptive accounts of the emergence of an American national literature, and a valuable complement to recent scholarly work that highlights the differential nature of national experience.

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