REVIEW ESSAY

Democracy, Memory, and Methodology

Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature. 
Paul Downes. 
239 pages.

Sealed With Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America. 
Sarah J. Purcell. 
278 pages.

Democracy is a central term in the arguments advanced by both Paul Downes in Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature and Sarah J. Purcell in Sealed With Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America, yet the word means something quite different to each author. For Downes, democracy names a political structure in which the people simultaneously occupy the positions of law-giver and law-receiver—a fundamental dualism that splits the democratic subject and has profound implications for systems of representation, whether political or literary. In Purcell’s hands, however, democracy is closely allied with pluralism: the “democratization of public memory” of the revolutionary war that is the focus of her work involves increased public participation in defining the meaning and history of the war across an array of class, race, and gender categories. In the context of these two books, democracy thus names something of a methodological divide or perhaps a missed encounter: juxtaposing these books highlights the divergent engagements of poststructuralist literary criticism and cultural history. Rather than seek to discern the failings of either methodological approach in this comparison, one might view the multiple paths of approach to the early national period demonstrated in these two works as salutary—demonstrative of vitality rather than deficiency. Individually, each of these books offers much in the way of insight concerning the workings of democracy in the early national
period; collectively, they suggest less the limitations of either historical or literary methodologies than the capaciousness of the term democracy as a historical, literary, political, and theoretical site of inquiry.

In his avowed concern with deconstruction and literary theory, Downes embarks on a project that is less familiar within the field of early national studies than Purcell’s cultural history. Indeed, given the historicism that informs even most literary studies in the field, Downes’s work has a novel, and sometimes unsettling feel to it precisely because of its literary theoretical bent. In broad terms, Downes is concerned with meaning-making in and around the Revolution and particularly with the decisive opposition between monarchy and democracy that structured much political and literary discourse of the time. The central deconstructive insight of the project concerns the interdependence of democracy and monarchy: rather than marking a binary opposition, Downes argues, the two terms describe an inextricable connection. As such, one can trace within the representational practices of democracy both an explicit rejection of monarchy and an implicit dependence upon notions of sovereignty contained therein. Downes thus proposes that “monarchism and republicanism [should] not be seen as the poles of an opposition but as different but related attempts to manage the same political problems” (5).

What are these political problems—the “paradoxes, inconsistencies and aporias” at stake in both monarchical and democratic structures of authority? For Downes, these problems primarily concern the legitimation of political authority—a legitimation that itself lacks legitimacy. Monarchy, for instance, turns to the theory of divine right to guarantee political authority (an “extra-legal” and “blasphemous” appropriation of divine authority, according to Downes); in related terms, democracy seeks to find its grounding in a location beyond politics—in a truth that transcends the merely political. As Jacques Derrida has argued, the attempt to find an extrapolitical site of democratic truth and authority is in evidence in a linguistic sleight of hand in the Declaration of Independence: the Declaration pronounces the sovereign power of the “People” into existence in a performative speech act but cloaks this act in mimetic or constative language by invoking both “Nature” and “Nature’s God” as sources of this legal authority. Citing Derrida’s reading of the Declaration, Downes thus proposes that the “constitutive aporias of the political” consist in “every-
thing that, under the name of politics, resists the passage between the constative theory of the state and its performative history” (7).

Because democracy shares problems of legitimation—and indeed, even faces a heightened “indeterminacy” as to the locus of sovereign authority—the conflicts of monarchy are not absent from early national texts but are inscribed within them. Beginning with J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and including Benjamin Franklin, Stephen Burroughs, Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper, Downes analyzes democratic uncertainty and aporia in the works of early American writers. Crèvecoeur’s reluctance to endorse the Revolution, for instance, is seen by Downes as fueled by insight into the irresolvable conflict between individualism and sovereign power under the rule of the people. As such, Crèvecoeur “anticipated what post-Marxist political philosophers like Ernesto Laclau have called the ‘constitutive incompletion’ of the democratic social order” (74). Formulations such as this point to one of the difficulties Downes courts throughout the book: namely a potential flattening of the specificity of the early national period in favor of the allure of powerful contemporary theoretical paradigms. One might ask, for instance, whether the reader hears the voice of Crèvecoeur or Laclau speaking in this analysis. Ideally, both Laclau and Crèvecoeur might acquire new meaning—a new accent—through the encounter Downes stages for us. And indeed, Downes’s readings are strongest when they lend historical depth and specificity to the deconstructive paradigm elaborated throughout the book.

The success of Downes’s methodology in yielding fresh perspective on the early national literary field is amply evident in the chapters of the book that focus on specific writers and thematics within their work. For instance, Downes proposes that a connection between democracy and monarchy surfaces in representations of Native Americans and the rhetoric of “Indian-hating.” Downes argues that the “silent, regal, and deceased Native American” (47) is a displaced figure of monarchical sovereignty, and one that Anglo-American revolutionaries seek both to kill and appropriate for their own democratic ends: “The constitutive role played by monachism as the other of revolutionary republicanism is remarked in a displaced and therefore distanced fashion by the tradition of invoking a native American nobility” (48). Downes convincingly links the rhetorical figure of the noble savage to the politics of democratic authority and opens a rich ter-
rain for considering the relation of Native American sovereignty to republican ideals. Turning his attention to gender and democracy, Downes is similarly illuminating: debates over extending the franchise to women (and the complex history of women’s right to vote in New Jersey) illustrate a particular anxiety about the relation between the one and many within democracy—between the singularity of the people as a sovereign body and the multiplicity and potential extensity of the many individuals who comprise the people. Downes thus concludes, “Woman becomes the name for an endless difference that threatened to subvert the sovereign democratic individual” (149). A final example of the sort of insight Downes generates into the specific topoi of literature in the period involves representations of secrecy and, more specifically, the secrecy of the ballot box. According to Downes, a thematics of paranoia and secrecy (amply in evidence, for instance, in the fiction of Charles Brockden Brown) is the flip side or obverse of the discourse of publicity and civic identity that has been elaborated in the work of Michael Warner. The “definitive non-self-identity” (125) of the democratic subject who is both giver and receiver of the law points to the difficulty of producing a transparent account of the interiority (the will) of the democratic citizen and hence suggests why secrecy, sect, and conspiracy may be dominant themes in fiction of the period.

One might speculate that Downes’s work will rub against the grain for empirically minded historians of the period: indeed, the very use of the term “democracy” may strike some readers as anachronistic in this period. For my own part, I would welcome a more direct engagement with existing work in the field that addresses democracy as a structure of authority allied to representational practices: recent books in this vein by both Dana Nelson and Nancy Ruttenburg, for instance, are addressed by Downes in passing, but seem worthy of more sustained dialogue. Ultimately, however, the very real critical force of the book rests upon Downes’s sustained deployment of dialectical thought: at every turn, the use of dialectical analysis enables Downes to produce a much richer territory for thought and enables the thoroughgoing revision of an implied Whig narrative of democratization in terms that are engaging, thought-provoking, and insightful.

To do justice to Purcell’s cultural history requires valorizing a quite different set of analytical moves—moves that readers of early American scholarship will surely find more familiar. There is, indeed, novel and inter-
esting ground covered in Purcell's history of the public memory of the Revolutionary War, but her work sits comfortably within existing methodologies of cultural history that have been used to great effect in scholarship of the period. In her concern with public memory and nationalism, Purcell's work follows surely in the footsteps of recent books by David Waldstreicher (In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1783) and Simon Newman (Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic), albeit with a more specific focus on the public deployment of military memory. Purcell effectively demonstrates that the memory of the war is itself a historical and cultural battleground: in the first century of U.S. history, an array of individuals contend for the power of meaning-making with respect to national identity, and the sacred history of the war is a key instrument for defining the shifting shape of the nation and its people.

According to Purcell, "Military memory, especially memory of the Revolutionary War, is really at the heart of American national identity" (1). What lends this somewhat lapidary claim interest is Purcell's equally central contention that military memory is never static—it never amounts to one thing at one time—and more often than not, is deployed in the service of a variety of competing visions of national identity. Purcell thus aims to narrate the creation and development of public war memory over time; she does so with close attention to the specific contexts and practices in and through which war memories were elaborated. As such, she is able to index both the immense variety of forms in which the war was memorialized (including celebration, statuary, song, print, and consumer goods) and the range of uses to which such memories were put, including shoring up class boundaries, loosening class boundaries, turning a personal profit, securing status for insiders, and creating status for individuals excluded from civic identity on the basis of race and/or gender. Moreover, a strong narrative thread runs through her account of the successive decades of memory-making following the war: over time, war memory is less and less the account of acts of heroism by elite men, more and more the story of many different kinds of individuals engaged in the shared battle of nation founding.

Memorialization of the war did not wait for the war’s end. Purcell demonstrates that the first public acts of memory or memory construction occurred with bombs still blasting in air. General Richard Montgomery, for
instance, was killed in 1775 while leading an attack on Quebec and became the “first government-sanctioned hero” (25) of the war when Congress commissioned a public funeral and the erection of a monument in his memory. According to Purcell, the need for a publicly celebrated hero arose less out of national consensus than from a wish for consensus in the face of military, economic, and political disarray within the yet-to-be-declared independent and yet-to-be-united states. Transforming the base reality of military failure into the golden haze of unifying national memory was thus the explicit aim of memorializing Montgomery. Yet on the day of the public funeral, thousands gathered for an oration delivered by Dr. William Smith, provost of the College of Philadelphia, that proved so controversial that Congress ultimately refused to publish it, despite having commissioned Smith to speak. Smith’s account of Montgomery’s heroism was insufficiently nationalist to perform the nation-building work desired by Congress: Smith emphasized Montgomery’s continued loyalty to the king as well as the paucity and poverty of his troops and arms in the assault on Quebec; he also dwelt on local rather than national allegiances linking audience members to soldiers who had died. As such, Smith’s memory of Montgomery was ill-suited to the aims of national unification Congress had in mind for their celebration; as Purcell points out, fashioning public memory involves both remembering and forgetting even at this early moment in the war.

Remembering the past is thus designed to create or bring into being a new version of the present: “Commemorations envisioned an audience that would define a new kind of American nation” (48), writes Purcell. Yet the conflict over memory that surfaces in Montgomery’s case is one that occurs repeatedly in Purcell’s history. In the decade following the war, for instance, a rhetoric of gratitude emerges that is focused on uniting the nation through the act of remembering heroic sacrifice. At the same time, however, a debate over precisely who deserves gratitude for war service, and in what form, emerges as well: “Gratitude for war heroes continued to be a consensus-building and stabilizing force, particularly in the festive culture that helped to define public patriotism in the aftermath of the war. . . . [Yet] those veterans who did most actively seek to use the political or social capital provided by public gratitude — Shay’s rebels, violent westerners, or aristocratic former officers — risked destabilizing the republic in the process” (91). Repeatedly, Purcell’s historical examples demonstrate
that the force of military memory as a source of unification is coupled with divisive debates over the shape and meaning of that memory. Increasingly, non-elite actors assert themselves as participants in the military action of the war and thus seek, often effectively, to gain recognition as figures of national significance and members of the nation.

A signal turn in the narrative of the “democratization” or pluralization of military memory occurs, for Purcell, in the early nineteenth century as debates break out over the status of the elite military hero Israel Putnam. Fueled by the heroism of middle- and lower-class men held as prisoners in the War of 1812, the “broadening of memory” of the Revolutionary War entailed the toppling of aristocratic figures such as Putnam. In 1818 Henry Dearborn publicly announced that Putnam had acted cowardly rather than heroically at Bunker Hill and set off a firestorm of debate that engaged the pens of John Adams and Daniel Webster, among others. In the final chapter of the book, Purcell adduces an additional (and somewhat ironic) example of increased democratization of memory and public voice in public participation in celebrating the return visit of Marquis de Lafayette in 1824 through the purchase of consumer goods. The “powerful influence and status of the democratic audience” (173) in the nineteenth century, Purcell argues, is demonstrated in their capacity to purchase mementos of the Lafayette visit. Indeed, Purcell documents the stunning array of goods created to enable the new consuming classes to participate in Lafayette’s return, including broadsides, sheet music, paper hats, decorative tickets, handbills, whiskey flasks, bottles, vases, china plates, platters, jugs, snuff boxes, buttons, and even kid leather boots embossed with pictures of Lafayette and Washington.

Ultimately, then, the push and pull of national unity and democratic disarray informs much of Purcell’s historical narrative. As she remarks at one point, the politics of democracy themselves augur for an intensive labor around memorialization and nation-building: “Without a king, to whom gratitude and praise were naturally owed, Americans would especially have to prove their worth as a republican nation by showing proper gratitude for a new kind of political order and by keeping military memory alive” (54). Here, Purcell’s language resonates with Downes’s concerns despite the methodological differences dividing the two. In the absence of a king who served as the symbolic locus of unity and authority, democracy requires strategies of replacement and displacement—stand-ins are
required to embody the extrapolitical truth of the nation. Purcell demonstrates quite powerfully that military history is one source for such images of unity, albeit a source that is itself always subject to debate. If Purcell’s book has a weakness, it is a tendency to presuppose the coherence and solidity of national identity—an identity that often seems given in advance in her prose formulations of it even as her evidence demonstrates the potential incoherence of the category of the national imaginary. Placing Downes’s work next to Purcell’s demonstrates that democracy is not in the least a unified field of scholarly inquiry; placing the work of these scholars in dialogue with one another suggests, further, that democracy (despite being a hallowed national term today) does not always function as a principle that unifies the people, the memories, or the writings of Americans.