SOVEREIGN SPIRITS: DEBTORS, REBELS, AND RADICALS IN EARLY AMERICAN PRINT

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Max White

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

As literary studies has departed from a nation-centric model of American literature in favor of a transnational approach that considers texts from North America, Europe, and the Caribbean, ideological, theoretical, and philosophical investigations of national origins have been eschewed in favor of materialist, historicist, and geographical readings of texts. The transnational approach foregrounds the recovery of forgotten writers, and incorporates archival materials as a means to better account for the range of texts and genres that circulated throughout the eighteenth century Atlantic world. However, the transnational approach is based largely on a historical narrative that distinguishes economic mobility from political power, and explains literary production as a product of seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth century economic development. Reading literary texts that contest this historical narrative, this project reveals a class-conscious assembly of writers who express deep skepticism of federal power and republicanism. Writing poetry, political pamphlets, regional histories, financial reports, novels, religious tracts, and short stories, these authors narrate founding era history in terms of economic relations, race, gender, and religion, and contest portrayals of a vibrant participatory democracy.

By demonstrating the centrality of class to the writings of Phillis Wheatley, Charles Brockden Brown, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Paine, and Washington Irving, among others, this dissertation argues for a reconceptualization of the nation as an economic construct rather than a political construct. Putting these authors into
conversation with progressive historians including Charles Beard, Terry Bouton, and William Hogeland shows a continuous contest over the terms of nation building that extends from the literature of the founding era through the literary nationalist movement of the early to mid-nineteenth century and into the history writing of our current day.
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Introduction

In “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA,” Phillis Wheatley asserts that “‘TWAS mercy brought me from my Pagan land, | Taught my benighted soul to understand | That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too: | Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.” This passage reveals Wheatley’s appreciative perspective of her transatlantic relocation, which Wheatley views as an instructive experience: Wheatley’s journey “taught” her “That there’s a God,” and enabled her “to understand” the value of “redemption.” In fact, Wheatley appreciates her transatlantic relocation so much that she urges readers to “Remember [that] Negros, black as Cain, | May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.”\(^1\) Wheatley’s religious education could serve as a model by which other black people “May be refin’d” and converted to Christianity. Although Wheatley does not mention slavery in this poem, as a slave herself, brought to America as a child, Wheatley understood that the transatlantic slave trade was the driving force behind America’s rapidly increasing black population. For Wheatley, then, Christianity offered a salvation in the afterlife unlike any type of freedom or privilege she might enjoy in her earthly life. Religious salvation might be so powerful, even, that it warranted enduring the life of an earthly slave in order to reach the heavenly reward that waited after death.

Wheatley’s position on her transformation from free African to enslaved black American hints at an instability and a mutability in the symbols of revolutionary era systems of power. Through the language of her religious faith, Wheatley understood

herself as a child of God, a member of a privileged spiritual population, the exact opposite of the enslaved human population to which Wheatley belonged in body. Wheatley was disempowered by the language of slavery – through the legal system that sanctioned slavery – but empowered as a believer. Rendered through the symbols of slavery – perhaps the most potent of which is the letter of attestation that precedes her *Poems* volume – Wheatley is cast in a state of perpetual unfreedom; rendered as a believer, she inhabits a probationary state with a decisive endpoint, and paradise waits beyond that endpoint. Thus, Wheatley’s religious poetry uses a language filled with symbols of promise and potential; in contrast, Wheatley’s poetry about slavery uses a language filled with symbols of restriction, limitation, and bondage. Tellingly, these languages mix and cross-pollinate in poems like “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA,” which reflects on Wheatley’s concurrent journeys to America – and enslavement – and God – and deliverance. The concurrency of Wheatley’s reflections on enslavement and spiritual rebirth further suggests that Wheatley’s poetics rely on unstable signifiers of power because it shows the poet challenging the language of one system of power with the language of another. Thus, Wheatley offers a complex rendering of her lived experience – the duality of her enslavement and spiritual rebirth – that navigates competing discourses of race and religion, and, in doing so, articulates an empowered literary identity.

Wheatley’s poetic ordering of her complex lived experiences advances a strategy of self-identification by which a black slave can escape a forced identity of unfreedom.
This strategy resists the simple classification of “slave” by invoking a competing classification of “Christian,” and demands further inquiry to the identification strategies employed by revolutionary era writers. The results of this inquiry suggest that simple labels such as “slave,” “Christian,” and “woman” are insufficient to capture the complexities of Wheatley’s poetic identification, and invite a rethinking of the identification labels often attached to writers. As a way to rethink those labels, this dissertation argues for a rethinking of class as an inclusive, shared identity that effectively captures the competing and sometimes contradictory nuances of discursively constructed identities. This definition of class breaks from the strict Marxist account of class as a person’s role in the production and consumption of goods, but interprets social identifications such as “slave” or “Christian” within the economic systems that influence social patterns and – broadly speaking – cultural production. My account of class hinges on a contention that political affiliation during the revolutionary era was determined more by economic interests than philosophical, religious, or personal beliefs, and that familiar historical accounts of the revolutionary era overstate the extent of formal political participation during that time.² This contention derives largely from the work of

² For a full account of the competing historical narratives surrounding the relationship between economics and political participation during the revolutionary era period, see William Hogeland, *Founding Finance: How Debt, Speculation, Foreclosures, Protests, and Crackdowns Made Us a Nation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 95-118. Hogeland argues that the work of Edmund Morgan, Richard Hofstadter, and Gordon Wood – the most influential critical narrative of the American Revolution – relies on a flawed 1955 study by Robert E. Brown, “concluding that in Massachusetts, and by implication throughout eighteenth-century America, virtually all white male adults could vote legally, and that those who couldn’t vote legally voted anyway. The expectation and
progressive historians including William Hogeland, Woody Holton, Terry Bouton, and Gary Nash, who argue that most Americans approached the question of independence with respect to their own economic interests, not an abstract concern for “liberty” or “freedom.” I maintain that this progressive historical narrative warrants reconsideration of the historical circumstances surrounding the American Revolution, and, by implication, the literary texts produced under those circumstances.

Reconsidering the historical descriptions of revolutionary era America, I argue that emerging and competing understandings of class inform and structure the subjective identifications found throughout familiar literary texts of the late-colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods of American literature. Thus, Wheatley’s attention to race and religion results from the economic exchanges that prompted her enslavement and education, and the language of race and religion speaks to the economic construction of Phillis Wheatley the poet as well as Phillis Wheatley the person. To speak of Wheatley’s conclusion of Brown’s work: American society was always essentially middle-class, and legitimate, representative American politics was therefore always exceptionally democratic” (102-103). Brown’s contemporary reviewers seemed equally skeptical of his work: one reviewer likened Brown to “a crusader fighting a holy war to prove that the class society of the colonies in the eighteenth century was, so far as Massachusetts was concerned and, by overt implication, the twelve other colonies too, actually a democratic society such as historians have thought did not exist before the days of Andrew Jackson… Such pretentiousness and absence of good taste leave the impression that the author considers all other scholars in the field not merely stupid, but fools.” Carl Bridenbaugh, review of Middle Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780, by Robert E. Brown, The Journal of Economic History 16:3 (1956): 433-434. 3 Terry Bouton, Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Woody Holton, Unruly Americans (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007). Gary B. Nash, The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America (New York: Viking, 2005).
class, then, is to speak of Wheatley’s complex identification as a slave and a Christian, a living piece of property and a producer of a literary commodity, in a term that conveys the full imbrication of Wheatley’s subjective identity and economic construction. The value of this understanding of class is that it interrogates Wheatley’s poetics with respect not only to what she called “various subjects, religious and moral,” but also with respect to the economic matters that informed revolutionary era politics and political language, the contested systems of representation that inform modern understandings of the American nation and national political subjectivity. As such, this project reconsiders familiar understandings of class and class interests as a means to better understand the ways in which early American literature grapples with the representational tension between individual political subjects – revolutionary and national political subjects – and collective economic interests in four distinct genres: religious writing, historiography, the political pamphlet, and the short stories. Throughout the dissertation, I show that early American writers demonstrate an acute awareness of class and class formation that has gone largely unnoticed by critics of early American literature, who have long privileged political affiliation and the circulation of material goods as sites of cultural production. In contrast to this critical emphasis, I maintain that class formation and class interests – understood according to my rethinking of class – play a formative role in the development of early American literary culture, a role that has previously been ascribed to political nationalism.

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Read in the historical context of the 1770s, when American political language evolved from a discourse of colonial protest into a discourse of revolutionary invention, Wheatley’s suggestion that revolutionary systems of power might be fluid and unstable points to a larger crisis of representation in which numerous understandings and definitions of power were challenged and upended throughout the American colonies and states. Indeed, revolutionary era Americans dissolved political ties with Britain and created innovative systems of self-government. They developed a plethora of economic plans to fund their state and continental governments, and devised countless paper currency schemes to encourage individual prosperity. They left the Anglican Church, and embraced George Whitefield and evangelicalism. They embraced antiestablishment laws and theorized natural religions, and slandered public figures as atheists. They embraced Thomas Paine’s antiauthoritarian stance in Common Sense, and rejected it in The Age of Reason. They authored a Declaration of Independence that asserts, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal,” and ratified a Constitution that acknowledged slavery and extended voting rights only to property owning white men. Revolutionary era America, then, was a time and place of social advancement and economic recession, political faith and religious skepticism, and individual empowerment and collective oppression. In short, revolutionary era Americans were awash in competing and often contradictory trends in public policies and sentiments that

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necessitated constant reassessment and reimagining of interpersonal relationships, and their written texts explore these complex, dynamic relationships.

As a community of writers, revolutionary era Americans invented a language to describe their constantly changing society, and, over time, a variety of literary genres and products to explore this new language. This new language grappled with the representational tension between the empowering rhetoric of pro-independence texts like Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, and the disempowering rhetoric that structured many elements of colonial life: legal restrictions on property ownership, fugitive slave laws, and state-sponsored religious publications, to name only a few. Class was central to this new language because the terms of social, economic, and legal distinctions often conflicted with the widely applicable empowering rhetoric of political independence; it made little sense to write about political allegiance on ideological grounds, divorced from the economic relations that informed a writer’s ideological grounding. Thus, Wheatley’s poetic exploration of the interconnected nature of slavery, commerce, and Christianity juxtaposes her lived experiences with empowering and disempowering rhetoric, and demonstrates the centrality of class to her formulation of poetic identity. Wheatley’s conclusion – that spiritual empowerment trumps the conditions of her enslavement and her displaced living conditions as the guiding principal for her identity – is a statement of shared identity – class affiliation – with other reborn Christians. Wheatley’s shared identity, though, depends as much on the material circumstances that enabled her to arrive at her beliefs as on the authentic conversion experience that inspires faith. This
interdependency between Wheatley’s material circumstances and spiritual devotion explain the strength of Wheatley’s class identification, an identification so strong that she instructs her white readers to bear in mind her personal experience as they consider evangelizing to other blacks, or their own relationship with God.

The progressive historical narrative that informs my understanding of class begins with the work of historian Charles Beard, whose 1913 book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, argues that the United States Constitution was designed explicitly to protect the political power and personal property rights of its wealthy framers.  

Beard establishes the grounds for his argument by refuting the traditional distinction between constitutional law and property law, and claiming that constitutional law is, fundamentally, an extension of property law.

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7 Beard’s rationale reads, in full:

Now, most of the law (except the elemental law of community defence) is concerned with the property relations of men, which reduced to their simple terms mean the processes by which the ownership of concrete forms of property is determined or passes from one person to another. As society becomes more settled and industrial in character, mere defence against violence (a very considerable portion of which originates in forcible attempts to change the ownership of property) becomes of relatively less importance; and property relations increase in complexity and subtlety.

But it may be said that constitutional law is a peculiar branch of the law; that it is not concerned primarily with property or with property relations, but with organs of government, the suffrage, administration. The superficiality of this view becomes apparent at a second glance. Inasmuch as the primary object of a government, beyond the mere repression of physical violence, is the making of the rules which determine the property relations of members of society, the dominant classes whose rights are thus to be determined must perforce obtain from the government such rules as are consonant with the larger interests necessary to the continuance of their economic processes, or they must themselves control the organs of government. In a stable despotism the former takes
constitutional law as an extension of property law, Beard concludes, “The social structure by which some type of legislation is secured and another prevented—that is, the constitution—is a secondary or derivative feature arising from the nature of the economic groups seeking positive action and negative restraint.”\(^8\) In other words, Beard argues that the system of government produced by the constitution is not the product of a political idea— an idea of free association based on a common national affiliation—rather, it is the product of “economic groups” seeking legislation that will benefit their own interests. Thus, for Beard, American political terminology falsely portrays a unified community of national subjects in an effort to obfuscate the economic interests of sub-national communities, which are formed according to class interests. Beard’s work reinterprets the founding era in order to better understand the political origins of the federal government, but Beard’s argument has two important—and related—implications for early American literary history. First, it suggests that the early Americans understood their relationship with the federal government as primarily an economic, rather than political, relationship. In light of this suggestion, any revolutionary era discussion of political affiliation must be interrogated as economic commentary. Second, it suggests that all of the legislation produced within the federalist system should be considered with respect to property

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\(^8\) Ibid, 12-13.
rights; specifically, with respect to property ownership and management. In light of this suggestion, legal terms and designations not typically associated with property – including legal arguments for and against independence – should be considered with respect to their impact on property ownership and management. I argue that we can rethink familiar narratives about early American literature – especially those of nation-building and literary nationalism – with respect to a political context animated by class and economic interest, rather than political nationalism alone. The effect of this rethinking is to interrogate the representational force of national communities without eliding the complexities of national identity.

Beard supports his argument with a detailed reading of *Federalist #10*; specifically, with an investigation of James Madison’s theory that political factions arise from competing economic interests.⁹ Because political factions result from economic interests, Beard explains, the ratification debate between Federalists and Antifederalists – usually construed as a political debate – needs to be reconsidered as a power struggle between competing economic interests, and the constitution that resulted from the power struggle, “our fundamental law,” must be read “not [as] the product of an abstraction known as ‘the whole people,’ but of a group of economic interests which must have

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⁹ Reading Madison, Beard concludes that “party doctrines and ‘principals’ originate in the sentiments and views which the possession of various kinds of property creates in the minds of the possessors; class and group divisions based on property lie at the basis of modern government; and politics and constitutional law are inevitable a reflex of these contending interests” (15-16). See chapter 3 of this dissertation for a detailed reading of Madison’s definition of faction.
expected beneficial results from its adoption.”

Thus, Beard suggests that the degree to which an American citizen identifies as a member of the political community represented by the federal government is determined by a person’s economic status, which preexists their national political affiliation. For early American texts concerned with national affiliation and communal identities – often represented by political language and references to political figures – the interpretive stakes of Beard’s argument are tremendous: Beard shows that economic interests are represented through the language of nationality and national political affiliation, precisely the vocabulary often used to describe early American social groups and communities, both literally and metaphorically. Beard’s economic interpretation of the Constitution recovers the economic dimension of American national political discourse at the precise historical moment when early American writers produced formative literary interrogations of American national identity that, in many ways, anticipated the later movement of literary nationalism.

Although Benedict Anderson’s model of the imagined national community has been extended and revised for more than twenty years, Anderson’s argument that “print-languages laid the bases for national consciousness” continues to inform critical understandings of the nation and nationalism. While critics have critiqued Anderson’s theory of the imagined community, they have not challenged Anderson’s portrayal of the

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10 Ibid, 17.
nation as a political body;\textsuperscript{12} critical approaches both inspired by and reacting to the Andersonian model have taken for granted the validity of a “national consciousness” based on political affiliation, but these approaches assume that abstract political language faithfully represents the “national consciousness.” Consequently, critics have considered literature with respect to problematics beyond the national model, but have not yet reconsidered what, precisely, the nation is; in other words, critics have revealed the limitations of Anderson’s national consciousness, but have accepted the underlying proposition that abstract political language conveys most of the ideological content contained by the national consciousness.

This critical trend can be traced primarily to Michael Warner’s 1990 book, \textit{The Letters of the Republic}, in which Warner extends Anderson’s idea of imagined community to “the creation of the [print] public sphere,” and argues that “The national community of the constitutional we is an aspect of the people’s abstractness and may be contrasted with the intense localism of the popular assemblies which were its main rival for the role of the people.”\textsuperscript{13} Warner continues, “‘We, the People’—is emphatically a pen name, a composite voice made articulable only in [writing].”\textsuperscript{14} Warner, then, produces his theory of “a republic of letters” – a politicized national imaginary community produced through the circulation of printed texts – on the grounds of a political nation first

\textsuperscript{12} Beginning with Michael Warner, \textit{The Letters of the Republic}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), a long line of literary critics have engaged Anderson’s portrayal of the nation as a political – rather than economic – construct. See footnote 16 for an extensive discussion of this critique.

\textsuperscript{13} Warner, \textit{The Letters of the Republic}, 63, 112.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}, 112.
articulated by Anderson. Warner reads the Declaration of Independence – a document that is, in many ways, a letter – as a text that extends Americans’ imagined community from the commercial listings in newspapers to the political terminology of the nation state. Thus, Warner’s “republic of letters” is predicated on community members’ participation in the commercial activity chronicled in newspaper listings, as well as their ability to cognitively invest in the political unit “we” of the Declaration of Independence.

As scholars including Trish Loughran and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon have pointed out, these two requirements radically diminish the scope of the community that might be imagined according to the constitutional we.\footnote{Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, \textit{New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Trish Loughran, \textit{The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).}

Beard’s reading of the constitution as an economic document also challenges the ideological potency of the constitutional we.\footnote{Loughran critiques Anderson’s imagined community on the grounds that it imagined simultaneity in a historical period when “the scale of the nation was [not] … conducive to a sense of shared, or simultaneous, experience” (12). More pointedly, Loughran critiques a “triple conflation—which links the cultural authority of the Constitution, \textit{The Federalist}, and print culture more generally” under the term “‘republican print ideology,’ understood as the widespread early national investment in print and printedness … as an ideological solution to the ongoing problems of localism and licentious self-interest that were so troubling to the founding generation” (113). Loughran’s critique shifts the terms of Anderson’s analysis of imagined communities from national to empirical, but did not rethink the political nature of a national or empirical community. Rather, she argues against the sufficiency of an ideological explanation for the formation of a community of readers. Dillon cites the “implicitly (if not always explicitly) national” quality of Anderson’s imagined community, as well as the imagined community’s dependence on “an abstract sense of belonging” (14, 89) as limitations of Anderson’s argument, again, without reconsidering the political nature of a national community. Loughran and Dillon account for the formation of discursive communities beyond the print public sphere – and}
As critics have extended Warner’s work from his reading of the Declaration of Independence – “The national community of the constitutional we” – they have overlooked the other half of this particular claim, “the people’s abstractness … may be contrasted with the intense localism of the popular assemblies which were its main rival for the role of the people.” However, Warner’s characterization of “the intense localism of the popular assemblies” elides the representative complexities of many texts produced by local popular assembly members and pre-constitution state governments, especially when the characterization is contrasted with “the people’s abstractness” as represented in the Declaration of Independence. In fact, locally attuned writers and politicians offered numerous proposals for organizing a national or federal government, and extensively theorized abstract origins for a countrywide community. In this sense, the only distinguishing element of “the national community of the constitutional we” is that it prevailed over other abstract origins, largely on the basis of the personal wealth and political prominence of the Founding Fathers. The constitutional we, then, derives its imaginary power not from a discursive process – its composition, reprinting, or public reading – but from its political functionality: its representational value. In Loughran’s words, “revolutionary ideology insisted that the legality of state institutions must derive reveal the limitations of the national paradigm in doing so – but move beyond the national model without fully pausing to reconsider how the national model structures community formation.

16 The claim also assumes no self-interest on the parts of the founders, as assumption that Beard disproves (see Economic Interpretation, 17-23).
not from embodied persons but from ‘the people’ en masse, abstractly conceived.”

Thus, the problem with reading revolutionary ideology as overly imbricated with print culture is the assumption of a singular, universalizing political narrative that includes a population larger than the unrepresentative collection of wealthy, educated white men primarily responsible for shaping their own political narrative.

One effect of the critical backlash towards the constitutional we has been the dismissal of the term’s imaginary potential. As critics have demonstrated the limitations imposed by the term and revealed communities of readers and writers not sanctioned by the constitutional we, they also have moved beyond a consideration of any ideological origins of nation-making. Where the nation is critically considered, it is usually considered from the perspective of political theory; questions of sovereign power and governing forces dominate more nuanced, historical evaluations of American political origins. In many ways, this critical trend is a modern continuation of divergent methods of historiography that Beard recognized in the early twentieth-century: considerations of the constitutional we rely on political accounts of nation formation, and dismissals of the term’s imaginary potential rely on economic accounts of the founding era. The result of

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19 In *New World Drama*, Dillon offers a compelling account of the limitations of the universalizing print public sphere narrative, on the basis of access to literacy: “Unpropertied whites and many propertied women had little access to education. More significantly, however, the enslaved African diasporic population of the Americas was not simply denied access to education, but was also subject to corporal punishment for seeking access to any forms of literacy… Forced a-literacy … fades from view in accounts of Atlantic world culture that center on the print public sphere” (14).
this schism is two distinct lines of inquiry, neither of which reads economic accounts of nation making as informed by political accounts of economic history. In response to this schism, Beard proposed a critical move away from political theory and towards economic theory:

the juristic theory of the origin and nature of the Constitution [and, therefore, the constitutional we] is marked by the same lack of analysis of determining forces which characterized older historical writing in general. It may be stated in the following manner: The Constitution proceeds from the whole people; the people are the original source of all political authority exercised under it; it is founded on broad general principles of liberty and government entertained, for some reason, by the whole people and having no reference to the interest or advantage of any particular group or class. (11)

In this passage, Beard dismisses the abstract, constitutional we as unrepresentative of “the whole people.” Moreover, Beard argues against “the juristic theory of the origin and nature of the Constitution,” and claims that the Constitution is not a political document inspired by Locke or the Magna Carta, but an economic document influenced by “the interest or advantage of [the] particular group or class” of men who authored it. From Beard’s analysis, it follows that the political language used to symbolize the national affiliation of American citizens is actually a signifier of the economic interests of the constitutional framers. The fundamental relationship between an American citizen and
the American national government, then, is not based on the notion of authentic representation – a person’s interest being represented in government – but, rather, the notion of representation within an economic system. From Beard’s perspective, people are read as property, not as community members.

Reading Beard in light of Anderson’s notion of the imagined community revises Anderson’s theory in a way that allows it to recover the economic dimension of the imaginary act; whereas Anderson’s imagined community is cast in terms of political nationalism, Beard’s imagined community is cast in terms of class interest. Anderson assumes that the emergence of a consumer class within the print marketplace precedes a separate emergence of political nationalism, an idea that originates in Jurgen Habermas’s characterization of the print public sphere as “bourgeois.”21 This idea suggests that political affiliation was first inspired by common economic concerns, a view maintained by most scholars influenced by the Habermas-Anderson-Warner print public sphere model.22 According to this model, then, the emergence of political affiliation – what

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22 Breen offers what is perhaps the most forceful articulation of this model, and explains it according to “an inventive story that might be called the ‘Tale of the Hospitable Consumer,’” in which “[colonial] Americans accepted the interpretive challenge [of forging a causational relationship] between parliamentary oppression and the consumption of British goods” (11). Breen rightly interprets this narrative as evidence of a shared sense of community based in American consumerism, and proceeds to consider consumer politics as the foundation of American national politics. Although Breen’s model is persuasive, it, too, takes for granted the faithful representation of political language: Breen argues that “consumer politics shaped independence” without considering the outcome of that independence. For Breen, the rhetoric of independence is
Anderson calls the national consciousness – is inspired by, but separate from, the economic affiliation that first brought together disparate groups of people across the American colonies. As such, this model also holds that the disembodied, abstract “we the people” is an empty signifier capable of being filled with whatever ideological or theoretical content a nationalized person might invest, but the model also insists that whatever ideological content might be contained in the constitutional we has no direct correlation to property ownership or economic interest. Rather, the constitutional we depends on mutability – a distinction from the economic origins of the terms – that, according to Warner, is precisely the source of its abstract power.  

In contrast to this, I argue that the imagined national political community – the constitutional we – was not a mutable signifier during the revolutionary era, and only has been read as a mutable signifier because of the modern historical narrative, what Beard calls “the juristic theory of the origin and nature of the Constitution.” Rather, I suggest that revolutionary era American writers were fully aware of the limitations and restrictions suggested by the constitutional we – specifically, the restrictions of property ownership and race and gender – which effectively defined American citizens as propertied white men. Indeed, Breen persuasively demonstrates that “a broadly shared sense of American identity… [and] an inchoate spirit of nationalism” originated with the 1774 tea boycott, which, carried out “in the name of liberty[,] represented a genuine

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considered separately from the rhetoric of nation making embodied in the constitution. This separation suggests a false equivalence between the moments of independence and the ratification, which imagine two distinctly different nations.

sacrifice [for lower and middling colonists], one that was perhaps even more difficult for them than it was for their social betters.”24 Breen argues that giving up tea was a greater sacrifice for poor people than for rich people because “as a mild stimulant, [tea] helped urban workers and marginal farmers endure hard physical labor,” an argument that suggests a causational relationship between the “hard physical labor” of poor people and the “broadly shared sense of American identity.”25 Considering nascent American identity and “inchoate nationalism” as derivative of the work of poor people, Breen neatly portrays a revolutionary moment in which the imagined national political community is founded on a class-conscious, egalitarian spirit of shared purpose.

Although Breen does not speak to the abstract power of the constitutional we, he implies that his portrayal of an egalitarian, shared purpose is embodied in the abstract term, and that this same purpose exists in the present day.26 Thus, Breen, unlike Warner, offers an account of American identity in which the revolutionary era constitutional we carries a fixed meaning, rooted in economic concerns. However, Breen, like Warner, suggests that the imagined national political community acts in the interests of the shared economic concerns that inspired its emergence, rather than departs from those shared economic concerns. This account of American national identity is at odds with how many revolutionary era American writers portrayed the emergence of national identity, especially after ratification. Specifically, many revolutionary era writers were skeptical

that the imagined national political community – the constitutional we – was designed to encourage the type of widespread prosperity described by Breen and Warner. These writers viewed the constitutional we as a political abstraction that only represented the economic interests that shaped it. For this reason, in contrast to the fixity of the constitutional we – in terminology, if not in imagined character – many revolutionary era writers offer competing, inclusive abstractions and origin stories that represent the national imagined community in other ways, and many of these competing abstractions resist the constitutional franchise restrictions of race, gender, and property.

Indeed, “intense localism,” to use Warner’s characterization, was only one response to the limitations of citizenship imposed by the constitutional we. Revolutionary era Americans not included in the constitutional we did resort to intense localism – the many backcountry rebellions of the 1780s were often animated by localist sentiments – but this localism emerged in conjunction with alternative theories of abstract origins. In one case, Herman Husband, a farmer, philosopher, and self-proclaimed prophet, demonstrated his “intense localism” by authoring a firsthand account of the Carolina Regulation, an uprising of frontier farmers in western North Carolina, and negotiating on

27 Local accounts of the Whiskey Rebellion demonstrate this skepticism: see chapter 2 for a full discussion of William Findley, History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Year M.DCC.XCIV. With a Recital of the Circumstances Specially Connected Therewith: And An Historical Review of the Previous Situation of the Country (Philadelphia: Samuel Harrison Smith, 1796). See also H.M. Brackenridge, History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Commonly Called the Whiskey Insurrection (Pittsburgh: W.S. Haven, 1859).

28 See Herman Husband, A Sermon to the Bucks and Hinds of America, (Philadelphia, 1788).
behalf of rebel farmers during the Whiskey Rebellion, an act for which he was
imprisoned. Between Husband’s expressions of “intense localism,” though, he published
a religious pamphlet proposing a transatlantic empire of yeomen farmers united by a
Supreme Council of elected representatives, theorized that the world would be bound
together by the imminent return of Christ, and encouraged uneducated Western farmers
to read Voltaire and support the French Revolution.29 Husband, then, was hardly opposed
to an ideological origin for his imagined community, or a constitutional we; indeed, he
believed intensely that his godly nation was foretold in the Book of Revelation, and
sought to bring about his vision through local politics and egalitarian economic policies.
Husband, then, proposed his own abstraction of an imagined national community – an
alternative to the constitutional we – one phrased in spiritual association and enacted in
economic policies – but it failed to find the audience of the more famous signifier.

In challenging the abstract origins of the constitutional we, Beard summarizes the
signifier’s restrictions: there are

four groups whose economic status had a definite legal expression: the
slaves, the indentured servants, the mass of men who could not qualify for
voting under the property tests imposed by the state constitutions and
laws, and women, disenfranchised and subjected to the discriminations of

29 For a full commentary on Husband’s “New Jerusalem” plan for managing the country,
and a broader contextualization of Husband’s thought, see Wythe Holt, “The New
Jerusalem: Herman Husband’s Egalitarian Alternative to the United States Constitution,”
in Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation,
ed. Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
the common law. These groups were, therefore, not represented in the
Convention which drafted the Constitution, except under the theory that
representation has no relation to voting.  

While Beard’s catalog of Americans excluded from the franchise recounts the familiar exclusions – women, unpropertied whites, people of color, indentured servants – it does so not according to race, gender, or class, but according to “a definite legal expression” of “economic status.” Beard, then, reads the exclusion of these groups of people as economically determined. In other words, Beard contests the assertion that the constitutional we was crafted to represent the interests of the classes of Americans excluded from “the Convention which drafted the Constitution,” which underlies the print public sphere model of republican citizenship. Thus, Beard demonstrates that revolutionary era “Nationalism was created by a welding of economic interests that cut through state boundaries,” and shows that nationalism is not a cultural nor political movement that emanates from a mutable signifier, nor an ideologically neutral abstraction meant to encourage imagined community.  

Rather, Beard understands revolutionary era nationalism as an economically informed, class-interested ideology of oppression by obfuscation, and Anderson and Warner’s republic of letters as a network of self-interested economic actors promoting their own interests in an abstract “language of

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30 *Beard, An Economic Interpretation*, 24.
rights and liberty” meant to inspire an imaginary – as opposed to a realized – community.

In perhaps the most developed account of the republic of letters – and the most generous reading of revolutionary era economics, Breen extends Warner’s characterization of the political imagined community, and acknowledges a “debt … to Benedict Anderson, [whose work] reshaped how a generation of historians understands the relation between commercial print culture and new forms of political identity such as nationalism.” Breen, however, “breaks with most previous accounts of [the revolutionary] period,” and “Instead of assuming the existence of political collectivities … asks how such a dispersed population generated a sense of trust sufficient to sustain colonial rebellion.” Breen concludes that “ordinary Americans affirmed their trust-worthiness through revolutionary acts that were then quickly reported in the popular press … and discovered that the language of rights and liberty was more than rhetoric.” In other words, Breen argues that Americans learned to trust “the language of rights and liberty” through the shared experience of reading newspaper accounts of “revolutionary acts.” Thus, Breen explains the discursive origins of the imagined American community, and furthers the critical narrative that divorces political representation from economic interests. Whereas Anderson and Warner portray the republic of letters as an imaginary political community representative of an American middle class, Breen

33 *Ibid*, 365 n49.
34 *Ibid*, xiii.
portrays the republic of letters as an imaginary political community representative of no particular economic interests. For Anderson and Warner, the constitutional we represents an emerging middle class that dominates revolutionary era politics; for Breen, the constitutional we represents the potential for widespread economic prosperity. For Beard, though, the constitutional we represents the economic interests of the wealthy men who authored the Constitution. It is Beard’s reading of the constitutional we that I extend in this dissertation.

In this dissertation, I read early American texts through Beard’s economic interpretation of the Constitution as a means to rethink the nation, nationality, and literary nationalism as potent literary devices used to engender political affiliation and communal identities. Specifically, I apply Beard’s economic interpretation to literary texts in order to reveal power structures that produce complex communal identities informed by political representations of class interests. National affiliation, then, is a communal identity that serves an economically regressive function in early America, and its expression in the language of politics renders the language of early national politics economically regressive, as well. This argument contradicts critical portrayals of both emergent capitalism and literary nationalism as empowering historical forces, and necessitates a reconsideration of the established, purely political critical notion of the nation, and the political narratives in which nationalism has been portrayed. In this context, literature acts as a window into the economic, political, and social conditions experienced by revolutionary era writers and readers. These conditions often inform one
another both in historical fact and literary plots, such as in Rip Van Winkle’s sudden transformation from politically apathetic, incompetent farmer to politically aware, oral historian. Rip changes from a colonial agrarian to a national historian, and enjoys a consequential elevation in social status. At the same time, he comes into a financially stable household, thanks to the work of his daughter. As such, I consider Rip’s transformation as a matter of class formation – Rip simultaneously becomes wealthier, national, and friendlier – in order to challenge the prevailing understanding of literary nationalism as a primarily political movement. Moreover, reading Rip’s story as a matter of class formation allows for a rethinking of Irving’s depiction of the young American nation as an imagined community in which politics and economics are fully imbricated and, perhaps, indistinguishable. Thus, literature exposes the economic orientation of revolutionary era politics.

In chapter one, I argue that religious writing, which I define as any text that explicitly concerns itself with spirituality, reflects the prevailing socioeconomic conditions that influenced the writer’s religious belief. Thus, although scholars have accounted for Phillis Wheatley’s personal history and the process by which she brought her poetry to the literary marketplace, they have not yet fully considered the class implications of Wheatley’s identification with George Whitefield, whose followers were primarily poor, rural white Americans. As Wheatley authored her poetry in a wealthy Boston household, I argue that her religious writing foregrounds matters of class and

class conflict that were an animating force in revolutionary-era American society. Therefore, reading Wheatley’s religious poetry in terms of class allows us to better understand the ways in which class was discussed in the literary public sphere of revolutionary era Boston.

In chapter two, I reveal a tension between local and national historiography that points to the determining role of class in shaping early American political history writing. Reading William Findley’s history of the Whiskey Rebellion, a 1794 uprising in Western Pennsylvania, against Alexander Hamilton’s 1790 Report on the Public Credit of the United States, an account of the early republic’s national deficit, I argue that national political histories elide local and regional perceptions of major social, economic, and political events. In so doing, national political histories obfuscate the class concerns and economic matters that often inform the events they purport to narrate. In the case of the Whiskey Rebellion, Findley holds that the so-called Whiskey Rebels did not represent a significant portion of Western Pennsylvania, and argues that local officials could have maintained control of the disgruntled farmers according to their own means. Moreover, Findley chronicles the regional economy in order to demonstrate the devastating impact of Hamilton’s whiskey excise, which taxed the de facto currency of backcountry settlers and farmers. In contrast to Findley’s History of the Insurrection, Hamilton’s Report on the Public Credit describes the early republic in terms of monetary value; the society that Findley describes in terms of people and practices exists for Hamilton as data and abstraction. Thus, Hamilton imagines a national economy financed by the whiskey excise
and domestic loans, and a nation built on the labor and commodities of a permanent underclass of debtors. Both Hamilton’s and Findley’s strategies of history writing appear in Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Arthur Mervyn*, which I read as a literary rendering of the narrative tension between local and national history. Brown’s use of the novel genre allows him to explore the representational complexities of early American history writing, and the novel’s subject matter suggests that class conflict loomed large in Brown’s literary imagination.

In chapter three, I show that Federalist political theory requires competing class interests in order to construct a model of government, and I explore Thomas Paine’s challenges to the Federalist system in both *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason*. Reading *Federalist #10*, I call attention to Madison’s definition of factions as competing levels of property owners, and the foundational role that difference in property rights plays in Madison’s theory of political representation. In *Common Sense*, Paine puts forward a language of politics both accessible to lower and middling Americans and democratizing in its conception of political representation. Paine’s new political language inspires a theory of “common” sense that presupposes a shared notion of intellectual property that freely circulates between compatriots, regardless of economic rank. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine critiques national churches and revealed religion on the grounds that they discourage critical inquiry into human nature and construct artificially inequitable power relations between men. Paine argues that his doctrine – deism mixed with natural religion – more closely aligns with the creation of the world and engenders a
more perfect public morality than Christianity and revealed religion. Thus, Paine resists the Federalist strategy of political representation and proposes a more egalitarian language and belief system to take its place. As such, I argue that Paine complicates our understanding of political subjectivity as a purely aesthetic relationship between an individual and a state. Paine’s critique of state and church power, as well as his rhetoric of individual empowerment, suggest that political subjectivity is grounded in matters of class and power relations as well as a politics of representation.

In chapter four, I reconsider literary nationalism with readings of Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” and Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” I demonstrate that “Rip Van Winkle” – and the critical narrative that understands literary nationalism as an extension of Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities – fosters a mythology of a classless American society that prevents us from interrogating the nation as a cultural construct informed by historical economic concerns. Reading the post-nap villagers as politicized Americans, I show that Irving’s depiction of early national citizens posits a correlation between political engagement and a classless society. However, Rip’s story is a fictional history recounted by a fictional narrator – Geoffrey Crayon – and scholars agree that Rip’s position of village historian is largely symbolic of early American literary nationalism. Therefore, in writing class concerns – i.e. differences in property ownership – out of the story of early American history, Irving engages in precisely the type of literary nationalism that foregoes interrogation of class difference under the auspice of encouraging a unifying, homogenizing national culture. Similarly, in “The Fall
of the House of Usher,” Poe’s portrayal of the decaying, decrepit Usher house suggests a deeper skepticism of the power of literary nationalism. Poe portrays literary nationalism as a byproduct of an expanded American literary marketplace, which is funded largely with paper money, and is a speculative investment; as such, Poe suggests, we should be skeptical of the national mythologies suggested by nationalist literature. This concern, I argue, is fundamentally grounded in Poe’s awareness of class interests, and points to a larger critical oversight in which the economic dimensions of the imagined national community disappear from view with the emergence of the dominant U.S. nation-state during the era of antebellum literature.
On Monday, December 3 1739, the Reverend George Whitefield preached to a small crowd in the town of North East, Maryland. Writing about the day’s engagement in his journal, Whitefield noted that “Little Notice having been given, there were not 1500 People; but GOD was with us, and I observed many were deeply affected.”\textsuperscript{37} The sermon was otherwise unremarkable for Whitefield, who often preached to crowds as large as 10,000, and whose comments on the occasion were limited to two sentences in his expansive personal journal. Such was not the case, however, for fifteen-year-old Herman Husband, one of the “deeply affected” witnesses to Whitefield’s sermon. Husband, whose parents brought him into town for the occasion, had hitherto lived a life of vice, often drinking and gambling with members of the local gentry. Upon hearing Whitefield preach, however, Husband experienced a rebirth. “The Spirit of God witnessed to me, and speaking in me says, thy Argument against me is now come to Naught,” Husband wrote of his rebirth. “I became now willing to take up the Cross,” Husband added, an indication that he planned to spend the rest of his life evangelizing.\textsuperscript{38}

Whitefield delivered his North East sermon in the midst of his second trip to the American colonies. Onlookers were likely attracted to Whitefield’s sermon as much by


\textsuperscript{38} Husband, Herman, \textit{Some Remarks on Religion, With the AUTHOR’s Experience in Pursuit thereof} (Philadelphia: William Bradford), 11.
his celebrity as by his message, as Whitefield’s first colonial visit, in 1738, extended the Great Awakening from New England cities and towns to rural communities of farmers and frontiersmen in the south and west. In doing so, Whitefield brought slaves and poor and middling whites into the Great Awakening, and thereby democratized the Evangelical movement. In fact, Whitefield returned to the colonies in late 1739 with funds for the construction of an orphanage, an institution that would primarily benefit the poor and destitute. Thus, through his preaching and writing Whitefield built a community of believers that was more economically diverse than the political community of colonists represented by the colonial governments. Whitefield’s community building enacted one
of the central tenet of Great Awakening era religious revival: anyone, regardless of class, could be saved through faith in God.\textsuperscript{41}

From 1739 – 1770, Whitefield enjoyed a remarkably successful career as a celebrity preacher to colonists all across America and wealthy patrons in Britain. As a personal chaplain to Selena Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, Whitefield dedicated many of her chapels and increased the visibility of The Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, a sect of Calvinistic Methodists.\textsuperscript{42} Using his fame and elite connections, Whitefield maintained a position of social prominence even as he remained a remarkably effective orator until he fell ill and died in Newburyport, Massachusetts, on September 30, 1770.\textsuperscript{43} Shortly before Whitefield’s death, in the city of Boston, Phillis Wheatley

\textsuperscript{41} According to Wythe Holt, “The New Jerusalem: Herman Husband’s Egalitarian Alternative to the United States Constitution,” in Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation, ed. Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 254, “The first Great Awakening was sweeping through English North America with the message that each human could know god from his or her own inner light.” This message effectively placed the power of salvation in the hands of every convert, rather than in the hands of a central preacher or minister. With respect to class, this message granted access to salvation to anyone who experienced a rebirth, rather than anyone who might be wealthy enough, or socially prominent enough, to attain membership in a prestigious church.


most likely attended one of Whitefield’s final sermons. The occasion moved her deeply, and when Whitefield died several months later, Wheatley authored an elegy to Whitefield that circulated throughout America and Britain and established her reputation as a skilled poet with a strong sense of occasion. Wheatley’s affinity for Whitefield’s message should not come as a surprise: Wheatley was an enslaved black woman living amongst the wealthiest white citizens of Boston, and Whitefield’s message of salvation through faith offered believers access to a system of representation in which God’s judgment superseded earthly distinctions of race, class, and gender. Moreover, Wheatley, most likely, had already written much of her first volume of poetry, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, by the time of Whitefield’s final sermons. As the title of Wheatley’s volume suggests, the poems dealt with religion and morality, as well as the “various subjects” such as birth, death, and personal character that are otherwise associated with faith and morality. Wheatley, then, well might have been Whitefield’s ideal audience.

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46 This statement is a synthesis of Whitefield’s attitude towards blacks and poor people, and supported by a broad characterization in Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "George Whitefield," accessed 24 November 2014, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/642729/George-Whitefield, “He believed that every truly religious person needs to experience a rebirth in Jesus; aside from this, he cared little for distinctions of denomination or geography.”
Whitefield’s role in launching the careers of two otherwise disconnected writers could not be more powerful, direct, or obscure. Powerful, because Whitefield brought about Husband’s rebirth, which in turn inspired most of Husband’s life decisions and published texts, and provided the occasion upon which Wheatley announced her work to a transatlantic readership, and thereby set the stage for the publication of her *Poems*. Direct, because Husband and Wheatley authored written responses to Whitefield sermons. Obscure, because Husband and Wheatley occupied different stations of life (Husband was a relatively wealthy landowner, and Wheatley was a slave) in colonial America, and their literary careers do not speak directly to one another, or Whitefield. The degree to which both Husband and Wheatley’s work is indebted to Whitefield’s message points to the tremendous influence of evangelical Christianity and the Great Awakening on many writers in the mid-eighteenth century, and invites deeper inquiry into the ways in which religious language allowed public conversations about other, more politically and socially controversial topics, to take place.\(^\text{47}\) In the cases of both Husband and Wheatley, written engagement with Whitefield’s brand of spirituality afforded them opportunities to comment on class distinctions in revolutionary era America.

Beginning with Husband’s biography, this chapter considers the ways in which Husband’s analysis of class interests in revolutionary era America intersects with Whitefield’s democratizing message of spiritual empowerment. It then explains how Wheatley, another Whitefield disciple, demonstrated a similar understanding of class interests in her poetry about “subjects religious and moral.” That Husband and Wheatley both voice their concerns about class by entering into a public conversation about religion reveals the politically charged context surrounding late eighteenth-century conversations about class; indeed, one needs look only to the brief seventeen year time span between the Declaration of Independence and the beheading of Louis XVI to grasp the powerful revolutionary potential posed by class conscious writers of this era. That is, in fewer than two decades, the world’s greatest colonial power was forced to surrender its most prosperous colonies and France’s poorest citizens overthrew one of Western Europe’s oldest monarchies. In America, a series of backcountry uprisings and rebellions occurred in the wake of the American Revolution, and almost all of the rebels in all of the rebellions argued that they were entitled to their independence from the Federal Government for the same reasons that the Continental Congress declared its independence from Britain.  

48 The most famous backcountry rebellions were Shays’ Rebellion in Massachusetts and the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania. In both instances, the rebels argued that their tax burden was unfair and that their interests were not represented in their respective governments. For an informative discussion of the common concerns of backcountry rebellions, see Saul Cornell, “The Limits of Dissenting Constitutionalism,” in The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism & the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 195-220. For an authoritative
every turn, and public officials often did all they could to protect their own interests and maintain public order. Thus, in the lead-up to the American Revolution, Husband’s advocacy for Regulator interests landed him in jail not at the hands of the colonial government, but of the local gentry whose vested interests Husband was actively working against: personal property, not national identity, was the most important issue. Husband learned from this experience, and adjusted his writing to account for this heightened awareness of anti-establishment sentiment: after settling in Pennsylvania, he wrote millenarian pamphlets rather than political commentary, but maintained an intense class-consciousness.


The most telling evidence of this is Adams’s support for the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, which criminalized speech that was critical of federal policies; in effect, however, the Acts were meant to protect the interests of the Federalist party. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the Alien and Sedition Acts and the interests of elected officials, see Stanley Elkins & Eric McKitrick, “The Mentality of Federalism in 1800,” in _The Age of Federalism_, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 691-754.

Specifically, when Husband advocated for Western interests leading up to the Whiskey Rebellion, he published a pamphlet titled _XIV Sermons on the Characters of Jacob’s Fourteen Sons_, which positively portrayed citizen militias similar to those ultimately formed by the rebels. See William Hogeland, _The Whiskey Rebellion_, 260. For a full account of Husband’s particular brand of millennialism, see Mark H. Jones, “Herman Husband: Millenarian, Carolina Regulator, and Whiskey Rebel” (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 1982).
prevailing hostility towards antiestablishment writing, particularly with respect to matters of economy.

Thus, the historical circumstances surrounding both Husband and Wheatley necessitate an inquiry into the ways in which their writings articulate class identity through a dual engagement with spirituality and economics. As devotees of George Whitefield, both Husband and Wheatley subscribed to a branch of evangelicalism that understood itself as a broad movement that “recognized the existence of one Christian church divided into multiple branches, each legitimate and vital to the growth of the whole.”51 This understanding of a singular, united spiritual body suggests a community identity based on inclusive principals that reflected Whitefield’s mass appeal and emphasis on widespread salvation. In contrast to this spiritual inclusiveness, “Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were the most [economically] unequal places in the Northeast” by the time of the Revolution, “and [in] the countryside surrounding New York City and Philadelphia … clientage and asymmetrical class relationships made power much more centralized.”52 Wheatley, writing in Boston, and Husband, writing in rural Pennsylvania, then, were writing from two of the epicenters of America’s increasing economic inequality. Their engagement with Whitefield’s inclusive spiritual community occurs in this context, and, consequently, articulates early American formulations of class.

51 Brown, “What is Evangelical Print Culture?” 34.
Part One: Class, Religion, and Politics in the Life and Writing of Herman Husband

Writing in 1771 under the pen name “Regulus,” Husband describes the events leading up to the War of Regulation – a battle between western farmers in North Carolina and the colonial government – including the failed negotiations between Fanning, the colonial lieutenant governor, and the Regulators. Titled *A Fan for Fanning*, Husband’s 64-page pamphlet purports to offer an “impartial account of the Rise of Progress of the so much talked of Regulation in North-Carolina.” In the pamphlet, Husband recounts the major incidents leading up to the Battle of Alamance – the culmination of the War of Regulation – and portrays those events as a series of extortive acts by the colonial administration that resulted in a disproportionate concentration of wealth and political power possessed by the colonial officials; Husband summarizes these events,

Thus were the People of Orange [County, North Carolina, where the War of Regulation occurred] insulted by the Sheriff, robbed, and plundered by Bombs, neglected and condemned by their Representatives, and abused by the Magistracy; obliged to pay Fees regulated only by the Avarice of the Officer, obliged to pay a Tax which they believed went to inrich, and aggrandise a few, who ordered it over them continually; and from all these Evils they saw no way to escape; for the Men in Power, and Legislation

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53 Herman Husband, title page to *A Fan For Fanning And A Touchstone To Tryon* (Boston: William Vassel, 1771).
were the Men whose interest it was to oppress, and make gain of the Labourer.\textsuperscript{54}

In this passage, Husband summarizes the wrongs systematically visited upon the residents of Orange County, and concludes that the aggrieved population “saw no way to escape” their oppressive government, aside from violent revolt. Moreover, Husband portrays a system of government that “neglected and condemned” its residents; however, the most instructive phrase in Husband’s summary is his description of the colonial legislative body, which he characterizes as “Men whose interest it was to oppress, and make gain of the Labourer.” This characterization suggests that Husband understood the colonial legislators not as corrupt politicians, but as a class of managers exploiting manual laborers. Husband, then, writing “to give an account of what has been called the Regulation in North-Carolina,” portrays the events not as a political conflict – a crisis of representation – but as a class conflict, a crisis determined by the economic conditions forced on the colonists.\textsuperscript{55}

Read as a political history of the Regulation, Husband’s pamphlet falls into the genre of local history. In the historical context of 1771 North Carolina, Husband’s local history becomes a history of another colonial revolt in the inevitable march towards the American Revolution. Although the matter of local control over local affairs is very much present throughout \textit{A Fan for Fanning}, Husband’s understanding of self-governance does

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\item \textsuperscript{54} Herman Husband, \textit{A Fan For Fanning And A Touchstone To Tryon} (Boston: William Vassel, 1771), 30.
\item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid}, iv.
\end{itemize}
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not correspond to the notion of political independence that tends to dominate political histories of colonial revolts. Husband does not conceive of the Regulators as an independent state so much as he understands the Regulators as an independent socio-economic unit. Indeed, Husband’s social vision demonstrates a keen awareness of the ways in which economic power impacts local politics, and imagines a political body that represents the economic interests of all citizens. Thus, *A Fan For Fanning* historicizes the Regulation not as an uprising against a tyrannical colonial government, but as a morally and ethically justified movement to reduce the material wants of poverty, and the resulting social ills. Husband is more of a politico-economic theorist than a local historian, a distinction which suggests that we should understand Husband’s analysis of the Regulation as a treatise on government, rather than antagonistic colonial propaganda.

Scholars have already attended to texts like this that were published in the aftermath of the American Revolution, but have not yet considered them in the buildup to it; this, primarily because the political historical narrative of revolution demands that we read Husband’s text as a complaint against a colonial power. Yet Husband never concerned himself with colonial power; rather, he focused on establishing a new political power based on morality and radical egalitarianism. Indeed, Husband never mentions

56 For an example of how this genre of writing is considered after the Revolution, see Terry Bouton, “The Pennsylvania Regulation of 1794,” in *Taming Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 216-244,

57 Dana Nelson argues that this genre of writing produces “radical reconceptualizations of democratic practice,” and explains that after the American Revolution, it was widely employed to consider potential models of government for the newly independent United States of America. *National Manhood*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 32.
American independence, a point that becomes exceedingly clear in his first extended critique of Fanning and Tryon:

Fanning, when he arrived in Carolina, seven or eight years ago, was poor; he had before he left Carolina, the last summer, amass'd a fortune, of near ten thousand pounds Sterling, and all out of the people, as will appear by and by [in the remainder of Husband's pamphlet].

How unfortunate is that Prince, who is sorely wounded thro' the side of base designing wretches, who prostitute all things sacred and civil to deceive their King, and to get into places of important trust; and because they have spent much time in barely sycophantising [sic.] to a noble Lord, and prostituting the honour and virtue of their family connections, when in place, run hard to bring up lost time, and the King's good subjects are made their beasts of burden and prey.

How fortunate, on the other hand, is that Prince, and happy the people, when he that governs, is a wise and good man, and one who knows the bound of the peoples privilege, and limits of the rulers power. Should not they who are thus happy, prize and love such an [sic.] one, and in every instance avoid giving him pain, remembrance [sic.] his anxiety and sollicitude [sic.], for the prosperity of the King, in his Master's subjects.  

58 Herman Husband, A Fan For Fanning, viii.
Husband's claim that Fanning “amass'd a fortune … all out of the people” makes a potent distinction between Fanning, the colonial administrator, and “the people” of North Carolina. Fanning is a political manager – a member of Husband’s “wicked idleness” class – not a citizen worker. Husband implies that Fanning’s fortune should not belong to him because it is the product of labor for which colonists have not been sufficiently compensated. As such, Fanning has turned “the King's good subjects” into “beasts of burden and prey;” by stealing the colonists’ labor, Fanning has also stolen their humanity. Moreover, Husband contrasts Fanning's patronage system with what might be instituted by a “wise and good” ruler “who knows the bound of the peoples [sic.] privilege, and limits of [his] power.” This comparison articulates an ethical critique of government, and suggests that an effective ruler balances his desire to exercise power with the restraint required to allow his subjects to decide how they want to live. In light of Husband’s earlier critique of Fanning’s poor management, it becomes clear that Husband’s stake in the pamphlet is the establishment of a government that produces an equitable and prosperous society, regardless of who serves as head of state.

Herman Husband’s story appears in few political histories of the Revolutionary period. Although progressive historians have considered some of Husband’s writings within the context of the “forgotten founders” narrative, which recovers unfamiliar historical actors and incorporates them into familiar historical narratives, Husband’s oeuvre and personal history have yet to be discussed on their own merits; that is, as more than representative of the genres of texts and classes of people excluded from the
American Revolution.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, even the most progressive political historians eschew Husband’s writings as representative – but insignificant – political and religious tracts cast in the mold of the agrarian, antifederalist movement that was defeated by ratification.\textsuperscript{60} In contrast to this position, I maintain that Husband’s writings, political activities, and personal relationships, suggest a different interpretation: Husband is not so much a “forgotten” founder, as a “failed” founder. Although both forgotten and failed founders might warrant inclusion in the narrative of American nation making, a forgotten founder would extend the existing national narrative whereas a failed founder would revise the national narrative.\textsuperscript{61} Whereas thinking of Husband as forgotten raises empirical


\textsuperscript{60} Young, Raphael, and Nash offer the most representative example of the “forgotten founders” narrative: “Most [forgotten founders] were associated with ‘popular’ movements (a contemporary term meaning broadly based and democratic), either as leaders or as writers who articulated a movement’s ideals. Others challenged established structures in their own individual struggles yet were also representative of broader trends. Collectively, their stories highlight the depth and range of our nation’s formative radical underpinnings.” Alfred F. Young, Ray Raphael, and Gary B. Nash, introduction to \textit{Revolutionary Founders} (New York: Random House, 2011), 5.

\textsuperscript{61} In yet another contrast to the “forgotten founders” narrative, Husband did not seek, precisely, to found a nation in the modern, political sense. Rather, as I suggest in the introduction to this dissertation, Husband offered a competing imaginary community of the constitutional we, one that challenged the symbolic dominance of the federalist model without engaging it directly. Jones offers some clarification, here: “unlike other Anti-federalist pamphlets, Husband’s work does not contain an extended critique of the federal Constitution. The centerpiece in his proposal for an alternative federal government based
questions of historical rigor, thinking of Husband as failed forces us to ask questions about the historical and discursive forces that failed him. In other words, our attention shifts from Husband’s own story to the stories in which he found himself; from this perspective, Husband’s life and writings reveal continuities between otherwise disparate texts, people, and events, rather than stand alone as an historical curiosity. This framing relocates Husband’s story from the fringe to the center of the revolutionary narrative, and helps us better understand Husband’s portrayal of class in revolutionary era America.

Born into an upper-class family in Cecil County, Maryland in 1724, Husband enjoyed a comfortable childhood on a prosperous plantation, as part of “a prosperous, landholding, slave-owning, Anglican family.” His grandfather, William Husband I, married a landed widow after coming to the colony as an indentured servant. William Husband II, Herman’s father, proved a capable estate manager and further increased the family’s land holdings. Herman Husband made the most of the opportunities his privileged childhood afforded, and, in the early 1750’s, became a large landowner in the

on Richard Price’s confederation of kingdoms, his own long-held ideas, millenarian interpretations, and western agrarian sectionalism” (296).

62 For an excellent, succinct summary of the competing narratives of the American revolutionary era, see William Hogeland, Inventing American History (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009). Hogeland offers a compelling skepticism of what he calls “an optimistic consensus reading” of the founding era (120), which hinges on the contention that the Framers imagined the same kind of public good as the broader population. Hogeland points to Edmund Morgan, The Birth of the Republic (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956) and Gordon S. Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (New York: Random House, 1991) as the two most important works in shaping this narrative.

63 Jones, “Herman Husband,” 8. All biographical information on Husband is drawn from Jones, 1-48.
North Carolina piedmont. Husband intended to develop these tracts and offer affordable leases to tenant farmers, in the hopes of turning them into freeholders. Husband’s efforts proved successful, and it was in that success that he first encountered significant adversity: the backcountry gentry extorted tenant farmers and freeholders alike, and because the same gentry controlled the courts, there was no effective legal recourse. Husband sent complaint letters to Lord Granville, the colonial proprietary, but Granville disregarded Husband’s complaints. Over time, tensions escalated between the colonial government and backcountry farmers, and Husband eventually found himself as the chief spokesman for the Regulator movement, an assembly of backcountry tenant farmers and freeholders that clashed with the colonial militia at the 1771 Battle of Alamance. The Regulators were routed, and Husband fled North Carolina under the pseudonym "Tuscape Death."

Husband resettled in western Pennsylvania, and, over the next twenty years, found himself involved with almost the exact same series of events that had unfolded in North Carolina. The Pennsylvania cycle culminated with the Whiskey Rebellion, a 1794 tax revolt, during which Husband reluctantly agreed to represent backcountry interests. Husband, in conjunction with Hugh Henry Brackenridge and other prominent western Pennsylvanians, drafted a petition for leniency and sent it to the Washington administration. Husband argued that local and regional authorities could capably manage

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64 For a comprehensive account of Husband’s activities in the North Carolina piedmont, including his role in the War of Regulation, see Jones, “Herman Husband,” 48-191.
65 For a comprehensive account of Husband’s activities in Pennsylvania, see Jones, “Herman Husband,” 263-367.
the Whiskey Rebels, and that Federal intervention was not required to end the uprising. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, who had taken personal charge of quashing the Whiskey Rebellion, dismissed Husband’s plea for local oversight, and like Colonial Governor Edmund Fanning twenty-three years earlier, made Husband the first name on his list of "insurgents" to be apprehended. This time, Husband was unable to escape capture: he was arrested and brought to Philadelphia to stand trial, where his charges were dismissed, but he died of pneumonia while returning home to Bedford. His wife and daughter buried him in a grave that is now lost.

Husband’s ignominious fate in both life and legacy seems unjust for a man who spent most of his life advancing egalitarian policies in matters of land ownership and political representation. Indeed, if Husband is not the most well known politician from this time period, it is largely because he worked against the interests of the framers who ultimately designed and administered the Federal Government. In addition to his work in the Granville District of British North Carolina, Husband was an active politician in Pennsylvania state affairs of the 1770s and 80s. In 1776, Husband served as a delegate to the Pennsylvania state constitutional convention. Later, he became a delegate to the populist state assembly. Husband played a prominent role in drafting what became the most radical of the 13 state constitutions, which established strict limits for property ownership, a schedule of depreciation for state currency, and a land bank to grant inexpensive credit to western farmers. In 1785, the resulting state assembly famously used its populist mandate to revoke the state charter for Robert Morris's Bank of North
America, a decision that enraged the financier and his wealthy allies in the Continental Congress. By the time of the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, Husband was an experienced, established political advocate for lower and middling class interests. Although he was charged with treason for his role in the Whiskey Rebellion, Husband’s arrest corresponds to the historical moment – the militant suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion – when, it can be argued, Federal sovereignty – and the elite class interests working to establish Federal sovereignty – established itself as the legitimate governing force in the nascent United States. Thus, Husband’s history reveals the incongruity between the outsized role of class interests in early republican politics and the bit part assigned to them by modern historians like Morgan and Wood. As such, this essay uses Husband’s history to discover class interests in revolutionary era texts not usually associated with class.

Husband's political career began inauspiciously in the North Carolina piedmont during the 1760's, as what today might be termed a community organizer. In 1766 and 1767, Husband and a group of likeminded farmers formed the Sandy Creek Association (named for the area’s main waterway), an organization dedicated to the improvement of backcountry living conditions in the Sandy Creek region: their primary goal was to rid the county of political and legal corruption. According to Jones, whose 1982 dissertation remains the authoritative biography of Herman Husband, lower-level administrative posts in the Sandy Creek region “carried enormous opportunities for influence and profit through fees, patronage, and issuing of licenses, commissions, and contracts for public improvements. Local officials often accumulated land through ... the purchase of
distrained property at manipulated auctions. Charging excessive fees and embezzling taxes also increased their incomes.”

Inspired by earlier meetings held in response to the Stamp Act, the Sandy Creek Association began to meet regularly and discuss members’ legal and financial problems. Most of these financial problems originated with the bribes forced on the Association’s members, many of whom eventually were forced to sell their unimproved lands at a lower price than they had paid, and forfeit their homes.

Husband led the Sandy Creek reform effort, and assumed the role of chief publicist for the Regulators. In this capacity, Husband authored several letters to Lieutenant-Governor Edmund Fanning and Royal Governor William Tryon, in which he called attention to the corrupt backcountry legal system and proposed a development model predicated on long-term improvement by landowners and renters; these improvements would raise property values by making the land more desirable, a positive outcome for speculators as well as freeholders. Husband’s proposal went unrequited, but he did eventually obtain an audience with colonial administration. Fanning agreed to meet Husband and other Regulator representatives at a mill on October 10, 1766, to discuss their grievances; instead, and without informing the Sandy Creek Association, Fanning sent an underling, James Watson, Clerk of Court, one of the corrupt officials responsible for the Regulators’ grievances. Watson's message was condescending, simple, and dismissive: “the use of the word 'judiciously' in one of the [meeting] advertisements implied that the assembly intended to usurp the power of the county court

... and the mill was too 'mean' a conference site." In other words, Fanning – via Watson – reprimanded the Sandy Creek Association for speaking out against the colonial administration, and told the farmers they were an uncultured mob, not a governing body. This was not the response Husband had been expecting.

Interpreting Jones’s portrayal of Husband’s experiences, it seems that the discrepancy between the response that Husband expected from Fanning and the response that he received demonstrates the importance of class-consciousness in revolutionary era political negotiations. Because of his substantial land holdings, Husband could have profited by siding with either the upper-class speculators or middling and lower class farmers. However, Husband’s class-conscious worldview pushed him to affiliate with the farmers because of the financial interests he described in his letter to Fanning: Husband wanted to create use value through property improvements, in conjunction with exchange value through speculation. The colonial administration and the speculators only wanted to create exchange value through speculation. This disagreement over which type of value to create reveals a conflict of class interests, and the result of the conflict – aborted negotiations between Husband and Fanning – suggests that this class conflict interrupted the functioning of the colonial political apparatus. That is, the colonial political system failed to adequately represent competing interests under the weight of capitalist conflict.

Husband revisited his position on government and class in his 1789 pamphlet, *XIV Sermons on the Characters of Jacob’s Fourteen Sons*. Written and published from

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his home in Bedford, Pennsylvania, where he settled after fleeing the Battle of Alamance, *XIV Sermons* elaborated Husband’s earlier claims linking moral virtue to lower and middling class labor. Jones describes *XIV Sermons* as “[Husband’s] most ambitious work to date, extensively elaborating upon his utopian and millenarian vision for the American West, his understanding of history, his criticisms of the Constitution, his class hostility to the idle rich, and his hope for revival of the spirit of liberty.”  

Indeed, Husband addresses all of these themes in *XIV Sermons*, but maintains an emphasis on religion that distinguishes the pamphlet from *A Fan For Fanning* and reveals the powerful role of religion in shaping Husband’s socio-economic ideals. Husband begins by pointing to the predetermined outcome of earthly conflicts, the reign of “freedom and liberty”:

> I have been under an engagement of mind from my youth to understand the scriptures, concerning the promises therein made to our fathers … where God said, ‘I will put enmity between thy seed, and the seed of the serpent; (that was between the seed of tyranny and oppression, and the seed of freedom and liberty)… That is, freedom and liberty shall prevail in the end … and with this agree all the promises from this first to the end of the revelations.”  

As this passage makes clear, Husband uses religious language to read political events as evidence of a divine plan: thus, the consistency with which the Bible promises

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redemption encourages Husband to imagine a society in which “freedom and liberty shall prevail.” As detailed in A Fan for Fanning, “freedom and liberty” emerge from widespread property ownership and a government designed to encourage and protect that relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth from the wicked designs of the wealthy. Husband’s egalitarian politico-economic theory, then, is derived just as much from the Bible as from contemporary political events.

The most revealing of Husband’s XIV Sermons is Sermon VII, addressed “To Gad (the body of freemen labourers, the militia and voters.).” The address is representative of Husband’s writing throughout the sermon, in which he intersperses Biblical references with contemporary translations. In this case, Husband shows readers that “the body of freemen labourers, the militia and voters” are the modern tribe of Gad; by doing this, Husband writes Americans into a Biblical narrative that promises “freedom and liberty” and prepares readers to imagine themselves as characters in a story that concludes with the triumph of the working classes. In the sermon’s body, Husband responds to Genesis 49:19, which “refers to attacks of nomadic tribes which would harass and annoy the Gadites but which they would successfully repel.” Husband identifies working class Americans as the modern day people of Israel, and interprets the Gadites’ perseverance as evidence that working class Americans will survive Federalist attacks on their persons.

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71 “Gad, a troop shall overcome him: but he shall overcome at the last,” according to the American King James Bible.
and property. Husband reminds readers that the Israelites were chosen by God to inherit the rewards promised in the Old Testament; accordingly, Husband asserts that “in the last days, the labouring, industrious people, the militia of freemen, shall prevail over the standing armies of kings and tyrants, that only rob them, and live upon their labour, in idleness and luxury. Without government, the strong and robust in body tyrannise; and property is not secured. With government, we have to guard against the crafty, designing, and lazy.”

In this claim, Husband skillfully mixes figurative, Biblical language and literal, class-based polemic. The “labouring, industrious people, the militia of freemen” refers to the population of working class farmers and tradesmen Husband identifies as the modern Israelites. These people will inherit the rewards promised to Abraham by God in the Old Testament, which Husband identifies as an equitable, agrarian society west of the Appalachian Mountains. The “standing armies of kings and tyrants, that … live … in idleness and luxury” clearly identifies the enemies of working class Americans: wealthy, powerful people who control professional fighters. Although the immediate political context surrounding Husband’s pamphlet demonstrates that “kings and tyrants” are the colonial government, Husband’s engagement with the Biblical narrative places the colonists into a broader, more significant context than colonial revolt: a global battle against evil, realized through earthly powers of oppression. Notably, Husband names “kings” rather than “a king,” and “tyrants” rather than “tyrants,” which pluralizes the

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struggle he sees unfolding. Moreover, Husband does not name “King George III” or even “Edmund Fanning” in this passage: the labels “king” and “tyrant” are not associated with any nation, race, or religion. The struggle Husband describes is a conflict between classes, the “labouring” and the “idle.”

Significantly, though, this conflict plays out not between workers and managers – that is, laborers and policy makers – but between “the militia of freemen” and “standing armies.” This distinction encourages solidarity among the American working class by pointing to the power of militiamen, and calls attention to the principal vice of the American managerial class – idleness – by distinguishing rulers from their armies, which reinforces Husband’s primary point: lazy rulers live in luxury at the expense of workers, both enemies and employees. Thus, although the primary function of government is to secure the property of “labouring, industrious people,” this task is often difficult because “lazy, designing, ambitious men will strive and contend for the mastery [of] civil weapons” by which they might “mislead [the country’s] militia, to fight against their own freedom.”

The greed and indulgence of the idle, wealthy ruling class leads to abuses of power that prevent government from carrying out its most basic function. Husband supports this political analysis with Zechariah 14:1, which describes

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74 This class conflict would have been easily recognizable for Husband’s readers because of the recent ratification debate, which pitted debtor farmers (usually Antifederalists) against capitalist merchants (usually Federalists). On the heels of the American Revolution, the ratification debate called attention to the significant economic disparity that divided the new country. See Hogeland, *Founding Finance*, 151-156.

the sacking of Jerusalem and the consequent loss of the Israelites’ civic powers.\textsuperscript{76} In the context of Husband’s class polemic, this passage calls attention to the process by which wealthy interests shape public opinion and divide working class interests along political and social lines; in this case, Federalist and Antifederalist politics.

Husband’s Scriptural interpretation produces a Biblical commentary that advocates working class solidarity and egalitarian social policy by equating working class Americans with the “labouring, industrious people” of the Bible, whom God proclaims will inherit the Earth in its final days. This radical reading of the Bible is thus not only an interpretive guide for a theological text, but also a social commentary on the problems posed by economic inequality. Thus, Husband’s writing links Whitefield’s brand of popular Evangelicalism to a class-based interpretation of contemporaneous events. Although this move probably resulted from Husband’s prior experience with class-based agitation in North Carolina, it did not, ultimately, protect him from arrest. Husband was arrested during the Whiskey Rebellion, and died before he could return home.

Socioeconomically speaking, then, Husband’s life unfolded along a stunningly negative trajectory: born into an upper-class plantation owning family, Husband went from estate

\textsuperscript{76} As written in the Sermon, Husband’s prose reads: “Behold! the day of the Lord cometh: and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee,’ [speaking of the Christian governments in Europe fighting one against another, instead of fighting against Turks or Infidels] for I will gather all nations,’ [those Christian nations] ‘against Jerusalem,’ [freedom] ‘to battle: and the city shall be taken,’ [powers of government] ‘and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go into captivity: and the residue shall not be cut off” (21).
manager to political antagonist to Pennsylvania Assemblyman to self-proclaimed prophet to enemy of the state; and, finally to corpse in an unmarked grave.

Part Two: Reading Class in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley

Husband’s lifelong celebration of Whitefield’s message, then, originates with a thought process in which Husband imagines his own conversion as part of a religious revival that he hopes to expand into a larger-scale political and economic movement. Moreover, Husband’s personal history – his failed attempts to found a society based on religious values of egalitarianism – offers a telling account of a socially attuned and historically minded writer who has been occluded from familiar narrative histories. In that regard, Husband’s story is hardly unique; however, the particular confluence of historical events and actors that impacted Husband’s life suggest that a better understanding of Husband and the movements in which he participated will help us better understand iconic events and ideas surrounding the American Revolution. Husband was politically active for approximately the thirty-year period of 1765-1795, an era that begins with the Stamp Act protests, concludes with the Whiskey Rebellion, and includes the American Revolution, Constitutional Convention, and French Revolution, all of which Husband addresses in his published writings. Moreover, Husband engaged with local, colonial, and federal politics throughout this time period. In the 1760’s and 70’s, he orally corresponded with Benjamin Franklin through a mutual acquaintance, John
Wilcox, who relayed political thoughts on his twice-a-year business trips to Philadelphia. Wilcox also brought Husband many of Franklin’s patriotic pamphlets, which Husband may have distributed in the Carolina piedmont. In the 1790’s, Husband’s reputation persuaded Benjamin Rush to cosponsor a petition asking that Husband be pardoned for his alleged participation in the Whiskey Rebellion; Alexander Hamilton and George Washington had personally ordered Husband’s arrest. In other words, Husband was far from an idle commentator during the politically tumultuous 1770’s, 80’s, and 90’s. On the contrary, he made himself known to Franklin, Rush, Washington, and Hamilton, four of the foremost political figures in American history. Moreover, he divided these figures on matters of free speech and economic policy, central concerns of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. In light of this context, Husband’s exclusion from familiar narrative histories becomes all the more troubling: Husband’s voice is an authentic voice of dissent – in a time period that supposedly celebrates dissent – conspicuously absent from the modern historical record. Thus, it raises questions about our own methodologies, as well as the material we study. Placing Husband’s voice and history alongside Wheatley’s voice and history changes the class resonances of

77 Caruthers, A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Rev. David Caldwell (Swaim and Sherwood: Greensboro, NC, 1842), 119-120. Husband’s own political writings from this period bear a strong resemblance to Franklin’s, and, in some cases, contain large swaths of Franklin’s text. Specifically, Husband reprinted Franklin’s “State Affairs” under the title “Sermons to Asses,” according to Caruthers.
78 On Husband’s pardon, see Caruthers, 168. On Hamilton and Washington’s role in Husband’s arrest, see William Hogeland, The Whiskey Rebellion (Simon and Schuster, 2010), 219-220.
Wheatley’s religious arguments, and extends the recovery of Wheatley’s poetry from race and gender readings to class and religion.

According to historian William Hogeland, Husband’s disappearance from the historical record took place in the 1940’s, when American historicism took a nationalist turn in response to Cold War politics. As part of the nationalist turn, historical dissenters and class antagonists were written out of U.S. histories in order to emphasize a democratic process of debate that culminated with the ratification of the Constitution, a process widely known as the Republican Synthesis. Specifically, Husband’s story reveals the political historical bias in favor of the Republican Synthesis and representative democratic politics. That is, the historical narrative commonly relied on by literature scholars engaged with historical recovery is hardly the comprehensive account of early America they might wish it to be; rather, it is a narrative that favors political consensus among the economic elite and overlooks the politics of class, which contested that consensus. Recent work in material culture studies, women’s writing, slave narratives, and transnational texts – among other subfields of literary studies – has recovered forgotten and lost texts, and revealed extensive networks of readers and writers who actively resisted the repressive and torturous living conditions that they all too frequently inhabited. In so doing, this work has broadened our understanding of the

79 For a detailed discussion of the Republican Synthesis, see Ed White, The Backcountry and the City (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005), particularly the Introduction.

80 Canonical works in these fields include Cathy Davidson, Revolution and the Word (1986) and Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic (1993), among others.
historical narrative to include stories and perspectives of raced and gendered subjects, those people who were tragically denied rights of self-determination in their own times and ignored by contemporaneous historians, invested in the celebration of representative democracy. The scholarship that reveals these voices accomplishes no less than, in the words of Stephen Greenblatt, “[speaking] with the dead,” and it continues to undo the “silencing of the past” described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In other words, this scholarship works to fill in the gaps in the American historical narrative by reclaiming forgotten and defeated writers and the texts they produced. Recovering Herman Husband’s writings and rereading Phillis Wheatley’s poetry extends that project by challenging the historical narrative that informs literary readings, and increasing the historical resonance of those literary readings.

Whereas the forgotten founder narrative explains how the Revolution impacted lower and working-class Americans, the defeated founder narrative asks how those founders envisioned the new nation. In his actions and writings, Husband resists powerful social and political establishments. Rather than illustrate the impact of the Revolution on lower and working-class Americans, Husband’s story demonstrates the unrealized revolutionary potential embodied in those lower and working-class Americans. Husband’s story and writings demand to be considered as evidence of a defeated founder.

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81 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 1. Michael-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) argues that the Haitian Revolution was unrecognizable to historians because they were unable to see a revolution successfully planned and carried out by black slaves at the turn of the nineteenth century.
because they reveal a historically aware writer composing a peculiar and uncommon commentary on class in the late eighteenth century. Thus, Husband offers a glimpse into the "what else" rather than the "what was." Similarly, Wheatley invokes her faith to imagine a life where she might enjoy the freedoms promised to her by her so-called “family.” In both cases, the writers articulate class-conscious critiques of their contemporary society by writing about religion; specifically, they argue for a mutually constitutive relationship between earthly and spiritual affairs that political historians have rushed to dismiss. In doing so, these historians understate economic concerns of Wheatley’s and Husband’s writings.

Wheatley’s 1770 poem, “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITEFIELD. 1770.” invokes spiritual imagery to elegize Whitefield, one of the era’s most widely known and successful evangelists, and one of the most influential preachers of the Great Awakening. Although the poem primarily concerns itself with glorifying Whitefield and his message of salvation, it also speaks to the people upon whom Whitefield left lasting impressions. Wheatley names “preachers,” “Americans,” “Africans,” “Orphans,” and “New England” as specific populations that will mourn and miss Whitefield, as well as Selena Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, to whom Whitefield was a personal chaplain. The poem, then, combines traditional elegiac elements with an informed sense of occasion and audience in order to position Whitefield’s death as a seminal moment for scores of Americans of all classes. Wheatley calls attention to two specific populations.

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composed almost entirely of lower class Americans – orphans and Africans – few of whom made their way to society’s upper levels. Indeed, part of Whitefield’s celebrity was derived from his appeal to all classes of Americans: “Whitefield, the ‘Divine Dramatist’… tried to inspire in [his] auditors an emotional conversion, in which the converts recognized their dependence on divine grace and experience a powerful change of heart.”

Whitefield preached that anyone could be saved, so long as they committed their life to living in the spirit of Christ: salvation depended on one’s faith, not their class or color or place of birth. This message of inclusive and universal salvation is what Wheatley elegized.

Born in Africa and brought to America aboard the slave ship *Phillis*, Wheatley lived most of her life as the object of capital, not its manipulator; whereas Husband employed inherited wealth to purchase property, Wheatley existed as property to serve her owners. Nonetheless, Wheatley, like Husband, received an extensive education and familiarized herself with classical and Biblical literature. In her poetry, Wheatley wrote extensively about the ways in which a class-stratified society produced social inequalities that disproportionately impacted particular groups of people. Wheatley reveals how race-based slavery engenders a disempowered subjectivity, even when the slave’s owner is “generous” and “kind” and considers her slave to be a family member; that is, Phillis’s membership in the Wheatley family does not supersede or negate her enslavement. Rather, Wheatley’s dual status as a slave and a family member calls attention to the

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contradictions inherent to the notion of a “kind master,” a notion that Whitefield delicately embraced in his attempts to evangelize to Southern whites. Whitefield’s refusal to advocate emancipation even as he preached humanity and kindness towards black slaves calls attention to one of the many dehumanizing effects of slavery: it removes the enslaved person from the normal realm of social relations, and establishes its own standards of acceptable interpersonal interactions. Thus, Wheatley’s poetry shows the impossibility of coherent social relations, at either the familial or political level, so long as that social relation is based on slavery; Whitefield’s rhetorical eloquence and mass appeal combat that incoherence, as Wheatley demonstrates in her elegy.

Wheatley begins the poem with an emphasis on Whitefield’s eloquence: she laments the loss of “the music of [Whitefield’s] tongue” (3) and the sermons it voiced, which “in unequall’d accents flow’d” (5). Wheatley continues, “Thou didst in strains of eloquence refin’d | Inflame the heart, and captivate the mind” (7-8). Wheatley, then, foregrounds the auditory elements of Whitefield’s preaching and points to the emotional

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84 Whitefield was one of the first preachers to expressly evangelize to black slaves. However, in an attempt to reach southern whites, Whitefield refrained from calling for emancipation, and “plea[d] for black and white southerners to look beyond the forms of religion and to embrace a personal relationship with God.” This was part of Whitefield’s larger recruitment strategy, which appealed to potential followers strictly on the basis of spiritual salvation. This strategy allowed slavery to exist, but encouraged humane treatment of slaves. For a full discussion, see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 23-54. Quotation from 35.

85 For an unrelated but more famous articulation of this critique of slavery, see Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Dover, 1995), 22. In this chapter of his *Narrative*, Douglass describes the corrupting influence of slavery on Sophia Auld, specifically the ways in which she learned to treat him as a slave rather than as a person the longer that he was in her service.
and intellectual stimulation it provided; Whitefield engaged listeners in body, mind, and spirit. Thus, Wheatley eulogizes Whitefield as a personal and spiritual inspiration, as well as a public figure; Whitefield’s public stature becomes the focal point of the second stanza, when Wheatley instructs readers to “Behold the prophet in his tow’ring flight!” (11). Wheatley continues, “He pray’d that grace in ev’ry heart might dwell, | He long’d to see America excel; | He charg’d its youth that ev’ry grace divine | Should with full lustre in their conduct shine; | That Saviour, which his soul did first receive, | The greatest gift that ev’n a God can give, | He freely offer’d to the num’rous throng” (20-26). In this passage, Wheatley registers the tremendous public esteem Whitefield enjoyed, and emphasizes that Whitefield “freely offer’d … The greatest gift that ev’n a God can give … to the num’rous throng.” In other words, according to Wheatley, Whitefield freely gifted faith and redemption to a diverse mass of Americans, including women, blacks, and poor people; the phrase “num’rous throng” emphasizes this. The prominent positioning of these remarks within Wheatley’s eulogy foregrounds Whitefield’s interactions with large masses of Americans, and, in the process, makes an argument that those interactions are most characteristic of Whitefield’s work.

In the third stanza, Wheatley appropriates Whitefield’s voice and preaches about the power of Christian rebirth. Wheatley portrays Christian rebirth as a universally accessible path to a better life on Earth and a place in eternal paradise. As Whitefield,

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Wheatley implores readers to “Take him [Jesus], ye wretched, for your only good, | Take him, ye starving sinners, for your food; | Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream, | Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme; | Take him, my dear Americans” (27-32) In this passage, Wheatley likens the “wretched,” “starving,” and “thirsty” to the unconverted. However, the unconverted are not “people,” broadly speaking: they are Americans, and, according to Wheatley, Americans are “wretched,” and “starving” and “thirsty” for Christ. This description is both literal and metaphorical: Wheatley instructs readers to lay their “complaints on [Christ’s] kind bosom,” which literally suggests that prayer will remedy the hunger and thirst of impoverished Americans. Metaphorically, Wheatley describes the palliative effects that prayer and Christian rebirth can have on vulnerable populations. African slaves are the most vulnerable of populations, and Wheatley addresses them next: continuing to speak as Whitefield, she writes, “Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you, | Impartial Saviour is his title due: | Wash’d in the fountain of redeeming blood, | You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God” (34-37). Here, Wheatley tells other African slaves that Christian rebirth will make them “sons, and kings, and priests to God.” In other words, Christian rebirth offers African slaves the favorable social status – and, by implication, the improved life that goes with it – that their enslavement denies them on Earth. Wheatley describes Christ as an “Impartial Saviour,” a description that circumspectly alludes to the partiality of earthly “saviors” who might prefer the rich, the white, or any other number of specific characteristics.
The third stanza, then, speaks to white and black Americans, freemen and slaves. Tellingly, though, Wheatley speaks both literally and metaphorically to “my dear Americans,” but only metaphorically to “ye Africans.” That is, although Wheatley promises African slaves that they “shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God,” she offers them none of the literal benefits of Christian rebirth – relief from hunger and thirst – that she offers to white Americans. Thus, Wheatley registers the racially determined inequities forced upon blacks even as she portrays Christian rebirth as a universally accessible path to a better life. Class concerns, then, are co-articulated with race, even as race is used to create a permanent underclass. Likewise, belief in Whitefield’s message of universal salvation provides the vocabulary to describe the effects of class inequalities and offer a path of resistance, even as Christian rebirth leads to spiritual and material salvation for white Americans, but only spiritual salvation for African slaves. Religious language, then, allows Wheatley to emphasize the determining role of race in the construction of class, and to demonstrate the universality of class concerns. That is, Wheatley shows that race and class are mutually constitutive social descriptors and suggests that white and black believers alike might work together to improve their lives through prayer.

Wheatley explores the mutual constitution of race and class throughout her poetry, but it is most apparent in considering her elegy for Whitefield alongside her poem to George Washington. Read together, these poems reveal a poet who mourns a populist evangelizer and idealizes national power. This contrast evokes a conflicted writer,
someone with irreconcilable sympathies for Whitefield, the evangelist who promises
salvation for all committed believers and advocates for the humane treatment of black
slaves, and Washington, the plantation-owning president who leads a political system that
values black slaves at three-fifths the rate of white people. Both Whitefield and
Washington occupy positions of authority, but the authorities they embody offer
contradictory perspectives on the matter of slavery: Whitefield’s religious authority
empowers slaves, Washington’s political authority disempowers slaves. Thus, Wheatley,
who admires the authority of both Washington and Whitefield, occupies a dichotomous
position relative to religious and political authority. Wheatley’s dichotomy emerges not
only from her admiration of Whitefield and Washington, but also from her contrasting
positions as a producer and object of property: that is, Wheatley produces the valued
commodity of poetry even as she is considered the property of her owner.

Eventually, Wheatley’s poetic reputation extended even to George Washington
and Thomas Jefferson – largely on the strength of her religious and elegiac poems – but
only once she was able to have her work published. Indeed, Wheatley’s journey to
publication required international travel, a letter of accreditation signed by many of
Boston’s most prominent white men, and an extensive, proactive network of white
women readers, Wheatley’s largest audience and the primary group supporting her
publication.\footnote{For a full discussion of Wheatley’s journey to publication, as well as the scholarly
debate surrounding it, see Joanna Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” \textit{Early American
Literature} 82:1 (March 2010).} Describing Wheatley’s difficult journey to publication, Joanna Brooks
shows the intimate connection between Wheatley’s poetry and the support Wheatley enjoyed from white women readers: Wheatley’s poems “mobilized her own grief and utilized her own uncanny understanding of the inner lives of white women to build a network of white female supporters.” As these supporters encouraged the publication of Wheatley’s work, so too did they consume the resulting commodity. Brooks maintains that this function of Wheatley’s poetry was intentional on the part of the poet, whose work ultimately “allowed white women to evade taking responsibility for their economic privilege – which capitalized on the unfreedom of enslaved men and women like Wheatley – and ultimately to evade their responsibility to the poet herself.”

Wheatley, then, reads colonial class relations – represented here by the conflict between the owners of human property and the humanity of the owned property – by recording the pain and suffering of slavery. In other words, Wheatley humanizes property exchange and class conflict by describing the human suffering of slaves. Moreover, Wheatley’s poetry “perform[s] the emotional labor of condolence and sympathy” for her white women readers, which means that the product of Wheatley’s labor was a heuristic tool used by readers to carry out a real and necessary task: mourning. All of this is to say that Wheatley’s work is thoroughly imbricated in the production, consumption, and commodification not only of literature, but also of transatlantic commerce, more broadly, which Wheatley encouraged. Brooks explains that “Wheatley attempted to bolster the

89 Ibid, 8.
90 Ibid pg. 8.
chances of her manuscript’s success[ful publication] … by preparing a number of prefatory documents and communicating with well-placed potential allies in London” via “Robert Calef, captain of John Wheatley’s ship, the London Packet.” 91 Wheatley, then, conveyed her manuscript to her publisher by way of a commercial vessel, and assembled her own dossier of recommendations and authentications; in other words, Wheatley was a skilled marketer, as well as a skilled poet. She was aware of the economic calculations that informed the exchange of goods, services, and capital, and used those dynamics to her advantage. Thus, we should read her poetry not only as literature, but also as a record of and commentary on her negotiation of the transatlantic print marketplace, which established economic relationships between authors, printers, and readers. 92

Wheatley’s untitled poem to George Washington was published about five years after her elegy for Whitefield. Wheatley sent the poem to Washington in October, 1775, and it appeared in the April 2, 1776 issue of the Pennsylvania Magazine, along with Wheatley’s letter to Washington that explains the occasion: Wheatley is excited by the prospect of American independence, and “[wishes Washington] all possible success in the great cause [he is] so generously engaged in.” 93 The poem is written in iambic pentameter, and employs classical conventions to emphasize the nationalizing power of

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91 Ibid pg. 6.
92 For a discussion of the transatlantic print marketplace as it relates to Wheatley, see Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” 9-10.
“Columbia’s scenes of glorious toil.” The poem’s opening lines establish its theme, America/Columbia’s military power: “While freedom’s cause her anxious breast alarms, | She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms” (3-4), Wheatley writes. Wheatley attributes Columbia’s military power to divine grace – she refers to America as “The land of freedom’s heaven-defended race” (32) – and throughout the poem, she praises the quantity, skill, and valor of American soldiers: “How pour [Columbia’s] armies through a thousand gates… In bright array they seek the work of war… [Columbia], first in place and honours,--we demand | The grace and glory of the martial band. | Fam’d for thy valour, for thy virtues more, | Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!” (14, 21-28). In these passages, Wheatley suggests that people around the world support American independence, and that Britain underestimates American military power and the virtuous cause of American independence. Moreover, the result of the conflict will be Washington’s ascent to ruling power. Wheatley writes, “Fix’d are the eyes of nations on the scales, | For in their hopes Columbia’s arm prevails. | Anon Britannia droops the pensive head, | While round increase the rising hills of dead. | Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia’s state! | Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late. | Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side, | Thy ev’ry action let the goddess guide. | A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shince, | With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine” (33-42).

Wheatley’s heralding of American military power and the virtue of Washington suggests a poet who is fervently committed to the national cause, generally, and

Washington’s leadership, specifically.\footnote{Washington’s response letter to Wheatley suggests that he was quite flattered to receive the poem, and Washington indicates that he would have published it himself, except that such an action might have been publicly viewed as serving his own vanity. The full text of Washington’s letter to Wheatley is available in the front-matter of \textit{The Poems of Phillis Wheatley} (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2010).} Wheatley’s nationalism is unexpected, however, because as a slave, Wheatley’s interests might actually have been better served as a member of the British Empire.\footnote{In summer 1772, a British court declared James Somersett, “an enslaved black man brought to London by his [American] master” (Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” 5), to be free so long as he remained on British soil. According to Brooks, the Somersett case “was broadly interpreted to establish England as a zone of emancipation for black slaves” (5).} Why, then, does Wheatley’s poem offer such unqualified support for American independence? Citing June Jordan, Brooks calls attention to “the limits of the sentimental formula Wheatley relied on to maintain her circle of supporters,” and “notes the dissolution of those relationships after Wheatley’s manumission, her twenty-first birthday, the death of Susannah Wheatley, and her marriage to John Peters.”\footnote{Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” 19.} As this information indicates, Wheatley’s ability to publish and circulate her work depended almost entirely on “[enabling] distractions, displacements, and disavowals that [facilitated] the aestheticization of victimhood, political incapacity, and irresponsibility among privileged white women.”\footnote{Ibid, 20.} In other words, the consumer demands to which Wheatley responded significantly shaped the poems she put forward for publication: her core demographic consumed poetry that “performed the emotional labor of condolence and sympathy,” to use Brooks’s words, and it seems reasonable that Wheatley’s poem to Washington might also have been
composed with consumer demand in mind. Specifically, we might best understand Wheatley’s poem to Washington as an effort – a successful effort, at that – to expand her network of supporters to include arguably the most influential person in North America. Understood as such, Wheatley’s poem to Washington can be read as a strategic move by which Wheatley sought to appeal to a wider readership and gain increased credibility in a public sphere controlled and dominated by white male writers.

Reading Wheatley’s elegy for Whitefield alongside her poem to Washington reveals the staggering inability of nationalist poetics to resist hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Specifically, Wheatley’s religious poetics imagine universal salvation and class solidarity across races and genders, and her nationalist poetics imagine citizen soldiers and widespread violence. In her elegy to Whitefield, Wheatley imagines an eternal paradise where African slaves, poor whites, and other believers live together: people are united in spite of their race, class, or gender. In her poem to Washington, Wheatley imagines a process of nation making that separates the living from the dead, and the American from the British. Whitefield’s brand of evangelicalism, then, unites, and political nationalism divides. In service to the nation, people are not brought together by salvation: they are brought together by death. Wheatley uses spiritual imagery to show that black slaves and poor whites both want for sustenance, and, through Whitefield’s ministry, can find strength in each other, the community of reborn Christians. In contrast, Wheatley’s description of Columbia marching to war leads to “rising hills of dead”

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99 Ibid, 8.
soldiers. Although Wheatley identifies American independence as a virtuous cause, she does not condone the violence of war or the deaths of British soldiers. Rather, American independence will lead to Washington being rewarded with “A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shines;” in other words, personal glory for Washington, but nothing about an equitable society. In fact, the American public is notably absent from Wheatley’s poem to Washington, except when she mentions military action. This further suggests that, for Wheatley, religious subject matter lends itself to an articulation of a class-based critique in a way that nationalist subject matter does not.

Conclusion: American Salvation and the Problem of Class

Although Whitefield preached to the multitudes, he was hardly unfamiliar with the wealthy and powerful in both America and Britain. In the colonies, Whitefield associated with prominent families – like the Wheatleys – who were committed to the Methodist movement, and supporting charities, particularly orphanages. It was in this context that Wheatley encountered Whitefield, and perhaps even became his acquaintance. According to Patricia Willis, “It is highly likely that [Whitefield] stayed at or visited the Wheatley home” in 1763, and “it is even more likely that Phillis heard him preach then or on his last visit in 1770.”

100 Willis argues that Wheatley’s 1770 encounter

with Whitefield deeply influenced her impression of him because Whitefield’s final visit to Boston – August 15, 1770 – occurred in the wake of the Boston Massacre – March 5, 1770 – which took place down the street from the Wheatley home, and would have been especially memorable for Wheatley because of the death of “Crispus Attucks, a sailor and an escaped slave.” Moreover, Willis argues that Wheatley likely knew Whitefield as both a personal acquaintance and as a public figure, which suggests that Wheatley’s description of Whitefield’s proffered salvation applies not only to her spiritual life, her immortal soul – the subject of Whitefield’s sermons – but also her earthly life, that of a slave – and the material circumstances through which Wheatley met Whitefield. Thus, Wheatley’s elegy for Whitefield demonstrates Wheatley’s cognizance of earthly and spiritual matters, and argues that the two are not unrelated. If salvation can be attained in the afterlife, some other sort of relief from suffering – an end to enslavement, freedom from the burden of labor – might be attained in this life.

Husband explains his conversion upon hearing Whitefield preach as a spiritual reflection occasioned by an earthly event: recounting a conversation between his parents, who brought him to town for Whitefield’s sermon, Husband remarks, “I heard One ask another, what does [Whitefield] preach? any Thing that is New? who answered No; nothing but what you may read every Day in your Bible: For what is this great Cry then? who was answered after this Manner, stay, you will hear him by and by, you never heard

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101 Ibid, 165.
102 Ibid, 165.
the like before.” Curiosity about Whitefield’s celebrity and rhetorical potency – curiosity about a public cultural phenomenon, something very human – exposed Husband to Whitefield’s message and revivalist brand of salvation – something very spiritual. Husband’s actual conversion, though, was completely spiritual: Husband describes the moment of his conversion, “I presently understood [Whitefield], for the Spirit of God witnessed to me, and speaking in me says, thy Argument against me is now come to Nought… I became now willing to take up the Cross.” Husband characterizes his conversion as an understanding and a conversation – earthly phenomena by which humans interpret the world – but asserts that he was able to understand the conversation only because “the Spirit of God” spoke inside of him. Husband “became now willing to take up the cross” – to devote his earthly life to spiritual causes – because he became able to understand the way to salvation. Spiritual matters, then, inform Husband’s interpretations and portrayals of earthly affairs, and vice versa. Husband is moved to support the Regulator cause because of his belief in a scripturally promised egalitarian society, and his indictment of extortive class relations is grounded in his spiritually inspired social vision.

In registering revolutionary era economic concerns of black slaves, women, and unpropertied whites, Husband and Wheatley reveal the early stages of more familiar systems of exclusion, those founded on race and gender. According to Dana Nelson, subjectively based mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion evolved over the course

103 Herman Husband, Some Remarks on Religion, 11.
104 Ibid, 11.
of the nineteenth-century and shifted from terms of class to terms of race and gender, and eventually became grounded in scientific discourse that supported discrimination.¹⁰⁵ By making race and gender appear stable and fixed, and concealing economic privilege behind raced and gendered discourse, Nelson argues, a small cadre of wealthy white men were able, essentially, to hide the fact that they were inordinately wealthy. As such, they created a fixed underclass of women, people of color, and lower-class white men who were indefinitely prevented from attaining a higher standard of living and contributing their ideas and opinions to state policy. Nelson’s project traces the development of race and gender discourse – her titular “national manhood” – but does not consider discourses of exclusion that predate the development of national manhood.

As a means to bring into focus this transformation in the discourse of exclusion, we might turn to Adam Smith; or, more precisely, James Buchan’s prescient reclamation of Adam Smith.¹⁰⁶ Buchan argues that Smith's writings have been perverted into “the bible of laissez-faire economics.” Buchan explains, “The phrase 'invisible hand' occurs three times in the million-odd words of Adam Smith's that have come down to us, and on not one of those occasions does it have anything to do with free-market capitalism or awesome international transactions.”¹⁰⁷ Rather, Buchan informs us, in “its first avatar, the invisible hand is not a commercial mechanism, but a circumlocution for God... Exposed to alarming and inexplicable natural phenomena, the savage mind sees the actions of 'the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid pg.2.
invisible hand of Jupiter.\textsuperscript{108} The subsequent appearances of the invisible hand are no more friendly to laissez-faire economics: its second appearance describes a God-like force, which Smith argued would encourage redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor,\textsuperscript{109} and its third appearance describes the forces outside of a merchant's control that might promote unintended consequences to his actions.\textsuperscript{110} From the perspective of a political historian working with consensus history, Whitefield might well have been this type of invisible hand: “Whitefield made advocacy on behalf of the enslaved the foundation of his campaign for spiritual renewal in the South… [and] even suggested that slaves might be justified in revolting, arguing that ‘should such a Thing be permitted by Providence, all good Men must acknowledge the Judgment would be just.’”\textsuperscript{111} That is, Whitefield, a widely influential figure never directly involved in politics, argued against the South’s chattel slavery economy, in favor of improved lives for black slaves, and pointed to an unintended consequence of slavers, a slave revolt. Whitefield, specifically, and popular public evangelical preachers, broadly, then, are the “invisible hands” of our political history, and reading revolutionary era texts composed under their influences shows a consideration of economic concerns and pre-national articulation of class.

Buchan's explanation of Smith's “invisible hand,” and thinking of Whitefield’s followers as that invisible hand, helps us better understand the relationship between spiritual and earthly matters in Husband and Wheatley’s writings. Although the idea of an

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, 63
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, 10.
\textsuperscript{111} Irons, Origins of Proslavery Christianity, 34.
“invisible hand” allowing “free markets” to determine “winners and losers” certainly fits with contemporary economic orthodoxy, it was not imagined, even by a different name, during the eighteenth-century. Rather, Smith’s “invisible hand” was quite visible in the form of George Whitefield, and the writers and believers he inspired. Like Smith, who understood the invisible hand as a divine, redistributive force that would alleviate suffering brought about by material want, Husband and Wheatley also saw a divine power that offered salvation. Unlike Smith, however, Husband and Wheatley’s writings suggest that salvation takes place after earthly existence, and point to earthly suffering as evidence that salvation is not to be found in this world. Specifically, they show that earthly suffering is brought about by the unfreedoms of material want and slavery, and that spiritual salvation is brought about by belief and faith that is accessible to anyone, even the lowest of classes. In contrast to contemporary misreadings of Smith's invisible hand, Husband's blend of historical analysis and religious commentary reveals the ways in which spiritual matters influenced economic programs. Likewise, in her elegy for George Whitefield, Wheatley explores spiritual argument against suffering brought about by material want due to class disparity. Class mattered very much to Husband and Wheatley, and figured prominently in their religious writings: considering this, we might begin to pose our own answer to Wheatley’s question “To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH,” “Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song | Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung?” (20-21) Wheatley answered that

\[112\] Phillis Wheatley, “To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH, His
“I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate | Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” (24-25), and therefore prayed that “Others may never feel tyrannic sway” (31).

Wheatley’s answer refers to race slavery, and asserts that want inspires desire; however, the historical context of Wheatley’s answer – and her precarious position as a producer and object of capital – suggests that the “tyrannic sway” of race slavery is in many ways realized through material circumstances dictated by class.

In 1789, David Ramsay published *The History of the American Revolution*; it was the first “academic” history of the American Revolution, and established a generic standard for U.S. historiography against which all subsequent histories would be measured. In 1796, two years after the conclusion of the Whiskey Rebellion, William Findley published *A History of the Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania in the Year 1794*. Hugh Henry Brackenridge soon published his history of the Whiskey Rebellion, as well, and in 1805 Mercy Otis Warren published *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. Perhaps not coincidentally, this earliest period of U.S. historiography coincided with the initial flurry of novels and political tracts that dominated the literary public sphere of the 1790’s. Firsthand witnesses to the creation of a nation-state, American writers eagerly chronicled the events unfolding before them.

This chapter considers written narratives from 1783-1805, the period I call the Age of Literary Anti-Federalism. I argue that this period of American literary history

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must be revisited according to a broader interpretation of federal power, which imported a new and unstable vocabulary of social relations to the early republic. Although this time coincides with the dominance of Federalist politics, and well-known texts such as The Federalist Papers theorize federal power and argue for its employ as a technology of governance, many of the lesser-known narratives from this period suggests a deep skepticism of federal power. This chapter focuses on that writing, and challenges the consensus historical narrative, which holds that federalism emerged from this time period as the government’s preferred strategy only after a rigorous public debate over its merits.114 In contrast to this portrayal, I argue that federalism became the de facto (Philadelphia: Samuel Harrison Smith, 1796) records the distinguishing geographic, social, economic, and political history of Western Pennsylvania, broadly, and the events of the Whiskey Rebellion, specifically, thereby opening a narrative space for readers to imagine the experience of life in Findley’s region. Both Findley and Brown explore the early republic from the perspective of a citizen, the subject of state power. In contrast to this perspective, Alexander Hamilton’s First Report on the Public Credit of the United States (New York: GPO, 1790) opens a narrative space where the reader – via the language of Federalism – is confronted with state power and unable to speak back to it. 114 For a detailed account of many of these debates, see Terry Bouton, “‘A Stronger Barrier Against Democracy’” and “Roads Closed,” in Taming Democracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171-196 and 197-215. In The Backcountry and the City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), Ed White attributes these characterizations to a scholarly perspective that sees “‘a vague ‘American simplicity’ contrasted with the spectacular political, cultural, and economic development triggered by the American Revolution and based in the cities of the United States” (xiv) that dismisses backcountry writing as unworthy of scholarly attention. In Founding Finance (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), William Hogeland describes a similar scholarly perspective, and attributes it to historicism produced by Cold War scholars like Forest McDonald, who derided progressive historians as unpatriotic. According to Hogeland, the Cold War backlash against progressive historicism silenced from “serious discussion of the American founding any suggestion that important, even defining, conflicts prevailed between rich, well-connected founders … and the huge majority of unrich, ordinary Americans who … spent the founding era protesting, rioting, petitioning,
technology of government only because Alexander Hamilton and several of his political allies assumed previously unimagined executive powers and instituted a financial program that strategically indebted the federal government as a means of coopting governing powers that had previously been reserved for the states.\(^{115}\) This argument explains, in part, why the emerging American middle class turned to novels rather than political discourse. Rather than a reasoned consensus, federalism was a draconian political project imposed in financial terms: as a result, the literary sphere was alive with counter narratives.\(^{116}\)

*Arthur Mervyn*: A radical critique of Hamiltonian power

occupying, and making demands on government in hopes of achieving access to economic development and restraining the power of wealth” (8).

\(^{115}\) Stephen Shapiro, *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2008) elegantly and succinctly summarizes the process by which an American governing elite seized the language of Federalism and put it to their economic interests:

Because the men who formed both sides of the existing political parties had been involved in forging independence, they relied on and monopolized an ornamental language of patriotism as a means of consecrating their status and legitimizing their financial schemes. Since the foreign trade merchants and their families had not been politically active or powerful throughout the 1770s and 1780s, they tended to avoid nationalist discourse, which did not speak to their international connections or compensate for their lack of domestic recognition. Instead these merchants and their children renovated older forms of expression, like those caught within the slightly obsolete British and French sentimental novel, to represent their anxieties and experiences (6).

\(^{116}\) For an authoritative and representative study of Federalism as a political theory and political movement — that is, one almost entirely divorced from matters of economy, finance, and class, see Stanley Elkins & Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
Charles Brockden Brown’s 1799 novel, *Arthur Mervyn*, employs history as a means to both characterize and critique fever-stricken Philadelphia. Although Mervyn’s story is fictional, the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic was quite real. Welbeck, Mervyn’s main antagonist, is a thief and counterfeiter who secludes himself in an abandoned mansion in order to avoid falling ill, and ultimately dies in debtor’s prison. In this instance, and other episodes throughout the story, Brown’s novel concerns itself with recent, significant events in the life of Philadelphians. Thus, although *Arthur Mervyn* explores a fictional American, Brown’s literary rendering of Arthur’s adventures in a real time and place narrate a story that very well could have happened. In this sense, Brown’s novel “exhibits a republican paradigm for its own medium”\(^{117}\) derived from “a ghostly intimation of simultaneity across homogenous, empty time. The weight of the words derives only in part from their solemn meaning; it comes also from an as-it-were ancestral Englishness.”\(^{118}\) That Brown’s novel performs this narrative work with respect to recent events suggests a generic and linguistic investment in history, both as a literary device and as a topic. The familiar elements of Mervyn’s world – panicked residents afraid to leave their homes, dubious urbanites looking to exploit naïve young people from the countryside – are not that different from what a Philadelphian who had lived through the Yellow Fever epidemic might have experienced. As such, we might think of *Arthur Mervyn* as an exemplary, albeit representative, example of how novels, in the absence of


\(^{118}\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.
national history, historicize events that might figure prominently in the national imaginary community. In other words, Brown tries to make Mervyn stand for a real Philadelphian who lived through the yellow fever epidemic, an historical figure to whom a reader might relate.

Michael Warner reads *Arthur Mervyn* as Brown’s literary explanation of “how ignorance may be overcome and benevolence actualized” in a republican society, and maintains that “[for Brown, the novel’s] value is that of an exemplary public instrument.”¹¹⁹ Further describing Brown’s literary goals with respect to *Arthur Mervyn*, Warner writes,

The standards for its appreciation would be nearly the same as those for historical accounts, execution narratives, sermons, or ethical treatises. The most salient difference would be that fiction’s inventedness allows one to make an even closer fit between theoretical problem-solving and practical knowledge. The challenges of republican society can be examined in the mode of history. Brown’s claim for the book rests on the public ratifiability of its practical and theoretical assertions rather than on any subjectively expressive dimensions.¹²⁰

According to Warner’s reading, then, *Arthur Mervyn* both operates “in the mode of history” and instructs readers how to be virtuous republican citizens. Warner contends that critics have mistakenly read the novel’s republicanism as ironic because they have

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sought “[to assimilate] the novel to a liberal aesthetic of authorial craft… [which values] indirect, artful, and privately anchored” aims, and that this misreading has pointed critics away from the “the explicit republicanism of the book.” Warner’s reading reveals the novel’s concerns with republicanism, virtue, and the relationship between republicanism and virtue, but seems to assume that the novel’s historicity is a background rather than a dynamic character. Indeed, Warner’s assertion that “The standards for [the novel’s] appreciation would be nearly the same as those for historical accounts, execution narratives, sermons, or ethical treatises” locates *Arthur Mervyn* within a collection of genres read according to Anderson’s “intimation of simultaneity across homogenous, empty time.” Historical narratives are written after events have occurred, execution narratives are written after a person has been killed, sermons are composed in consideration of texts that describe the creation of the world, and ethical treatises explore human behavior according to values that are not contingent on time and place. Thus, according to Warner, the abstract, timeless, transferable virtue of republicanism – as articulated through Mervyn’s narrated thought processes - should also be read as transcendent of time and place, despite the historically contingent nature of the print public sphere.

In contrast to this position, I maintain that Brown’s concern with the functioning of the republic might be better characterized as a fictional exploration of recent history.

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122 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.
than an allegorical story of republican virtue. Warner marries the republic to the conditions of print and print publication in the eighteenth-century, but mistakenly, I think, applies Anderson’s definition of “an imagined political community”\textsuperscript{124} to it. Indeed, Anderson divorces the nation from any specific time and place on the grounds that, quite simply, the nation exists only in the minds of its imaginers. Thus, despite differentiating republicanism from “nationalism in the liberal society of the nineteenth century,”\textsuperscript{125} Warner contends that Brown’s allegory of republican virtue draws on a fixed, stable understanding of historical events. This understanding of historical events derives from Anderson’s “imagined political community” because republicanism – a brand of politics – assumes a representational capacity in which identity is fixed. Thus, for Warner, Mervyn’s acts of virtuous republicanism are directed at a politically imagined society. \textit{Arthur Mervyn} has more to offer, though, when read as an allegory of an economically imagined society struggling to find a stable political identity.

Warner attributes the character Arthur Mervyn’s transformation of personal circumstances to “the sheer energy of [Mervyn’s] mind, coupled with a perfect sincerity. Mervyn’s naivety is depicted in detail, but the effect is all the more to display the energy of his virtuous mind in overcoming his initial ignorance.”\textsuperscript{126} Warner’s reading describes Mervyn’s transformation from an impoverished farm boy to a middle-class professional, and emphasizes Mervyn’s agency – his participation – in that transformation. Read in this

\textsuperscript{124} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 6.
\textsuperscript{125} Warner, \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 176.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Ibid}, 154.
way, Mervyn is a character empowered by republican virtue and invested in his own fate; against this interpretation, I argue that Mervyn is actually a passive, static character who only finds his circumstances improved by a dynamic, powerful history that propels him into the middle-class. Indeed, by the novel’s final chapter, Mervyn is a significantly different character than he was in its early stages. Whereas Mervyn first appears on Dr. Stevens’s doorstep as a socially and economically naïve young man from the country, gravely ill with yellow fever, Mervyn appears in the final chapter as a healthy, wealthy and wise physician in training. Mervyn’s story, then, is one of acquired skills and material rewards.

Despite the significant changes to Mervyn’s character, the novel’s narrator is nearly identical at the conclusion as at the beginning. It is Dr. Stevens, a successful physician, who narrates the novel’s first half. Thus, although Arthur Mervyn has navigated the prisons and hospitals of 1793 Philadelphia and emerged from this journey as a changed individual, the novel’s narrator is much the same at the end as he is in the beginning. Stephen Shaprio approaches this narrative structure as the result of Mervyn’s memoir writing process, and attributes it to Stevens’ initial decision to take Mervyn into his home. Shapiro writes, “As soon as the doctor takes Mervyn up, he starts a process of scripting the man’s interiority that begins by convincing Mervyn to confess his past, continues with Stevens’s decision that Mervyn should model him by learning to be a doctor, and ends with Mervyn having his own memoir literally written out by Stevens for
Shapiro’s reading suggests that not only Mervyn’s story, but also Mervyn’s composition process serve to bring Mervyn into the community of middle-class professionals to which Stevens already belongs. From this perspective, Mervyn’s engagement with the print public sphere is not so much about virtuous republicanism, as it is about the learned thought processes and behaviors – and the material rewards that accompany professionalizing thought processes and behaviors – that constitute class membership. Indeed, the similarity between narrators suggests that middle or upper class socioeconomic status is a precondition for participation in the print public sphere. Although Mervyn was a scribe by trade, he was not able narrate the text until he attained social and economic membership in the middle class. By implication, this precondition suggests that like their non-white non-male counterparts, lower class people were not members of the American democracy. Although Mervyn was able to attain membership in the middle class, the passivity with which he navigates 1793 Philadelphia suggests that his becoming successful was more due to chance than skill or merit. This interpretation resists the upward-mobility myth, one of the justifications that contemporary scholars rely on to aggrandize the Founders’ system of representative democracy.  

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127 Shapiro, Culture and Commerce, 271.
We might argue that although Mervyn’s story has a happy ending, the conditions under which this ending was produced have only been strengthened by Mervyn’s passivity and conformity towards established social norms and authority figures. An illustrative example of this is Mervyn’s conversation with Doctor Stevens regarding his decision to marry Ascha Fielding. Stevens begins the conversation, “Sit down, Arthur, and let us no longer treat this matter lightly. I clearly see the importance of this moment to this lady’s happiness and yours. It is plain that you love this woman. How could you help it?” Stevens dominates this dialogue: he instructs Mervyn to move his body – “Sit down, Arthur” – and explains to Mervyn the value of marriage – “I clearly see the importance of this moment.” Even Stevens’ rhetorical question – “How could you help it?” – suggests that Mervyn is powerless. Stevens continues to address Mervyn,

>You, who are her chosen friend, who partake her pleasures and share her employments, on whom she almost exclusively bestows her society and confidence, and to whom she thus affords the strongest of all indirect proofs of impassioned esteem, - how could you, with all that firmness of love, joined with all that discernment of her excellence, how could you escape the enchantment?</p>

Here, Stevens provides Mervyn with a model of how to analyze his relationship with Ascha. Again, Stevens acts as the knower, and Mervyn acts as the learner; Stevens is the actor, and Mervyn is acted upon. Mervyn’s passivity is further suggested by Stevens’

130 Ibid, 333.
analysis: Ascha chose Mervyn as a friend; Ascha spends time with Mervyn; Ascha “bestows her society and confidence.” Stevens’ analysis, then, points to Ascha’s actions upon Mervyn, not Mervyn’s actions upon Ascha. Moreover, the result of Ascha’s actions is described as an “enchantment” from which Mervyn would have to “escape.” Again, Mervyn is passive, acted upon, and – metaphorically – confined. Mervyn is, in short, the product of others’ actions, not his own; to borrow Shapiro’s words, “Brown uses Arthur Mervyn’s tale to see what kind of ‘man’ or typical subjectivity the social forces of the 1790s produce.”

Mervyn, then, does not win so much as he gets lucky; indeed, it is Mervyn’s decision to restore property to its rightful owner that results in his own financial success and personal fulfillment. When Mervyn returns the money to the Maurice family, he is initially denied the reward, which – unbeknownst to him – had been promised to a finder. This series of events suggests that members of the upper class can do what they want, and the only way middle or lower class people can join the upper class is to serve their interests. This class-stratification seems out of place, to say the least, in a democratic-republic that trumpets the myth of upward mobility, and considering the role that class-stratification plays in the novel might be helpful to rethink Welbeck, who is usually considered the novel’s villain. Welbeck, a forger and a counterfeiter, occupied land he did not own and illegally produced his own currency. Although the novel makes clear that Welbeck kept Clemenza Lodi confined to his house and killed a man named Watson,

131 Shapiro, Culture and Commerce, 274.
Welbeck’s actions seem to be as much a product of his dire circumstances as results of a genuinely evil character. Tellingly, Welbeck dies in debtors’ prison, not a jail for violent criminals. Although Mervyn is circumspect with his words and careful to resist jumping to conclusions regarding other characters’ morality or ethics, he does spend the bulk of the novel critiquing the behavior of others. One of the novel’s more climactic moments comes when Mervyn burns $20,000 of Welbeck’s stolen money, believing it to be counterfeit. Mervyn burns the money to save Welbeck from the temptation of spending counterfeit money, and is concerned only with helping to save Welbeck’s soul, not pay his debts. In fact, Mervyn makes most of his decisions with no regard at all for financial matters, a pattern that he acknowledges and tells Stevens dates to his childhood.

Mervyn’s childhood neighbors “thought [him] slothful, incurious, destitute of knowledge and of all thirst for knowledge, insolent, and profligate.” Mervyn says that he “hated school … [but] loved to leap, to run, to swim, to climb trees and to clamber up rocks, to shroud myself in thickets and stroll among woods, to obey the impulse of the moment… [He] hated to be classed, cribbed, rebuked, and feruled” at school. He also admits to working very little on his father’s farm, and attributes his idleness to physical weakness, saying “What my age and my constitution enabled me to do could be done by a sturdy boy, in half the time, with half the toil, and with none of the reluctance.”

Mervyn adds that the hired help necessitated by his weakness cost next to nothing, and therefore was not a terrible drain on his family, even if it seemed that way to an outsider.

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Welbeck’s thievery and unvirtuous behavior contrast with Mervyn’s honesty and virtue; thus, the story’s ending support’s Warner’s portrayal of a didactic republican novel. However, the didactic republican novel reading seems to ascribe too much agency to Mervyn, who describes himself as hesitant to engage in productive labor – he “hated school” – and who Shapiro portrays as the subject of “Stevens’s mythology of bourgeois benevolence.” Welbeck, in contrast, is one of the novel’s most active characters: he embraces the active management of fictitious capital for disreputable purposes, and dies in a debtors’ prison. Considering the contrasting outcomes and work ethics of Mervyn and Welbeck, Brown seems to offer and indictment of the type of work being done in the Federalist period. Moreover, Brown seems to suggest that the nature of this work – unethical as it might be – is more the product of historical development than a project of duplicitous politicians. Indeed, Mervyn’s story is told in hindsight, which effectively renders the title character’s “Memoirs of the Year 1793” a history of a fictional character.

Following Charles Bennet, Mark Kamrath suggests that “Brown used ‘historical materials’ in his novels most conspicuously in Arthur Mervyn… [the novel] uses [its characters’] ‘past’ as a means of further exploring issues of historical representation, agency, and epistemology.” Understood as such, Brown’s narrative becomes as an informative and interrogative literary rendering of the U.S. capital, and invites readers to think critically about that world. The lesson of Mervyn’s history, then, might be

133 Shapiro, Culture and Commerce, 274.
understood to be that virtuous republican morals get rewarded (following Warner), or that assuming middle-class values and professional skills is a prerequisite for political agency (following Shapiro). Regardless of the lesson, as a socioeconomic commentary, the memoirs of Arthur Mervyn ascribe a unique power to historical events; with respect to Brown’s “burst of novelistic productivity” – including Arthur Mervyn – Kamrath suggests that “[Brown] focused on history as a subject, his novels using a range of historical circumstances, personal and familial histories, and reflections on the meaning and function of history as part of his ongoing efforts to represent the past.”

In Arthur Mervyn, then, Brown offers a radical critique of the emerging socioeconomic order coming to power in the early republic. And, indeed, under Hamilton’s financial program, a small class of elites and slightly larger class of urban professionals become more comfortable, while laborers and farmers die in debtors’ prisons.

Competing Claims to Early American Public Right: National and Republican History Writing

As federal power increased exponentially from 1787 through 1805, writers across genres grew increasingly skeptical of federalism as a viable theory of government and fiscal management, specifically, and centralized power, more broadly. This skepticism pervades private correspondences and published essays, early novels and national

\[135\] *Ibid*, 27.
histories. Although *The Federalist Papers* remain the most famous and noteworthy commentary on federal power (and, indeed, were published in 1787-88), Hamilton, Madison, and Jay’s essays should not be taken to characterize an entire era of writing about federal power. To the extent that anti-federalist arguments are considered at all by historians and literary critics, they are usually portrayed as politically inspired critiques of Federalist theory rather than class based anxieties.136 Following the work of scholars like Ed White, William Hogeland, and Terry Bouton, who have worked against this narrative, I maintain that because of their economically attuned register, critiques of federal power are more diverse and progressive than they may initially seem; *Arthur Mervyn*, in this sense, is a critique of federal power.

Critiques of federal power are visible in eighteenth-century histories of the Whiskey Rebellion, as well as in early American novels that doubt the ability of centralized power to effectively represent the interests of a large country with many competing economic interests, among other texts and genres. Narratives that offer this

136 Edmund S. Morgan *The Birth of the Republic* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1956) put forward the most influential articulation of this argument: “In spite of the bitter fight that preceded ratification, the differences between Federalists and anti-Federalists were primarily differences of opinions about means, not fundamental differences of principle… Their disagreement was over the question whether the proposed separation of powers would be an adequate guard” (155). Earlier, Morgan points out that Constitutional Convention delegates “would represent the views of the most powerful and wealthy sections of the three million [inhabitants of the soon to be United States]” (148), which effectively removes conversations about class from the ratification debate, a position that Shapiro (see footnote four) supports, as well. Thus, I argue, the need to read the language of Federalism as the language of class, and the reason to read federal power in histories and novels as representative of a dismissal of lower and middling class concerns that happened at the time of ratification.
critique, I argue, reveal literary characterizations of emerging class identities that have largely escaped the established historical narrative, and, consequently, has not been fully accounted for in literary history. Moreover, these literary characterizations can be understood according to two distinct models of history writing. In the early national period, national history writing narrates an origin story about a group of people understood to belong to a nation. The story imagines social and cultural homogeneity, and celebrates military victories. In contrast, early national era republican historiography provides readers with an understanding of the way a system of governance and social order comes to dominate a group of people who might already belong to several different nations.¹³⁷ This understanding is the foundation of republican history writing, which narrates social and cultural heterogeneity and celebrates political institutions. The stark division between the two suggests that the history of a republic and the history of a nation require markedly different narratives, and reveal different power relations within a society.

In a 1976 lecture on the history of French history writing, Foucault delineates the process by which France came to understand itself as both a historically grounded nation and a modern republic.¹³⁸ Foucault argues that, beginning with Henri Boulainvilliers’s _Historie de l’ancien gouvernement de la France_ [History of the old government of

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¹³⁷ Although not considered in this chapter, Cooper’s _The Pioneers_ offers one example of a national historiography.

France] and Etat de la France, avec des memoires sur l’ancien gouvernement [State of France, with memories of the former government], both published in 1727, history writing assumes the dual functions of telling an origin story and theorizing public right. This happens because Boulainvilliers’s text “protest[s] against the fact that the knowledge given to the king, and then to the prince, is a knowledge manufactured by the administrative machine itself.” In other words, Boulainvilliers pointed out that historical discourse existed at the discretion of the king and was publicly deployed to support the king’s interests. By virtue of this discovery, Foucault informs us, Boulainvilliers’s text asserts a public right to history and historical discourse: a citizenry is entitled to know how it is governed and the reasons for that arrangement. Whereas earlier history writing treated public right as a derivative of the king’s right to rule, Boulainvilliers’s history treated public right as a power of consent possessed by the governed citizenry. The story of political power, then - and the narrative histories these stories engender – becomes a dialogue rather than a monologue. Using modern historical discourse, an interlocutor can occupy a dominant position relative to another person according to what Foucault calls “power’s right,” which he defines as a didactic public discourse that circulates “as a lesson in public right.” This means that subjective domination – an unbalanced relationship between people – is produced by a public story about the past, and the ways in which that story is deployed in modern society.

139 Ibid, 125-129.
140 Ibid, 116.
The moment Foucault locates as the advent of modern history writing – Boulainvilliers’s 1727 histories – also marks the advent of what I call republican history writing. After the American Revolution – amidst the cacophony of narrative histories and historically attuned texts produced in the late eighteenth century – republican history writing became the hegemonic discourse of narrative history. Republican history writing produces narratives that emphasize a citizen’s position in the republican political system as the primary means by which a citizen can gain access to public right.\footnote{141 These narratives tend to be most prominent in texts that consider social, political, and economic systems. \textit{Ormond}, for instance, portrays a society in which mobility depends on class. Constantia enjoys relative mobility and autonomy before her father’s ruin, and after Ormond’s death. During most of the novel’s action, however, Constantia remains relatively immobile; Ormond, in contrast, is constantly changing locations, hiding, watching, and laying traps. Mobility, then, is determined by a character’s position in the novel’s socio-economic hierarchy. Reading mobility as a privilege conferred by political, social, and economic agency reveals a portrayal of early American society in which public right is only attainable for a privileged few, most of whom were propertied white men. Thus, one of the more socially potent elements of republican historiography is that the discourse exposes injustices of race and gender as they are perpetrated through class-based systems.} These narratives, of which \textit{Arthur Mervyn} is one, deploy the language of republicanism throughout the reading public and characterize power in legal and ethical terms. They function as a discourse of public right. In contrast, national history writing produces narratives that emphasize national belonging as the primary means by which a citizen can claim access to public right. These narratives, including Hamilton’s \textit{Report on the Public Credit}, deploy the language of nationalism and collectivity as a means to characterize public right. They function as a discourse of social power. The tension between these competing understandings of public right plays out in republican and national claims to
political power, which offer different and largely incompatible portrayals of the relationship between the public and the government. Republican history writing attends to the country’s political and economic institutions; public right is constituted as legislative power, and imagined as the constitutional we. National history writing attends to the country’s social institutions; public right is constituted as social belonging via family origin and cultural homogeneity. These understandings of public right are incompatible, and, consequently, produce competing narratives of public right. Thus, history writing – fundamentally writing of claims to public right – produces narratives that circulate as competing discourses of power, and suggest contradictory claims to political legitimacy.

As a republican history narrative, *Arthur Mervyn* makes a particular type of claim to public right in the early republic. Kamrath claims that “to practice ‘free rational inquiry’ with one’s natural reason is at the core of Quaker doctrine. And this is an

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142 For competing narratives of public right, see two documents discussed later in this chapter: Hamilton’s *First Report on the Public Credit* and Washington’s 1792 letter to Hamilton. Hamilton’s *Report* clearly delineates the implied powers of the Federal Government to assume states’ war debts and issue paper currency to be exchanged at face value to specie, hard currency. Washington’s 1792 letter summarizes the main grievances of Whiskey Rebels, who claimed that the Federal Government did not have the power to issue limitless amounts of paper currency. The paper currency debate is instructive to the question of public right because it speaks to the political relationship between value and labor; that is, the Federal Government decides how labor is valued, and, consequently, compensated. Hamilton argued that value could be created, assigned to a war bond (or a service), and exchanged through paper currency because of people’s faith that the Federal Government would honor the value of the paper note. Whiskey Rebels argued that value depended on physical labor and production; the material improvement of society. Ultimately, the question of value leads to the matter of public right because the early American political system was accessible only to members of the propertied and moneyed classes.
important point for understanding Brown’s method of historical inquiry, early political radicalism, and, ultimately, what later drives his historical ethos” because Brown’s family was deeply steeped in the Quaker intellectual tradition.\textsuperscript{143} Accordingly, a scene such as Stevens’s lecture to Mervyn about why he should marry Ascha suggests not only what Shapiro calls “Stevens’s mythology of bourgeois benevolence,”\textsuperscript{144} but also a claim to public right grounded in Mervyn’s increasing professionalization and conformity to middle-class social norms, such as marriage. Brown portrays public right as rooted in sound economic decisions, like Mervyn’s decision to become a doctor, and full embrace of the republican life. Politics are notably absent from Mervyn’s story, but Mervyn’s experiences occur in an historical setting heavily informed by the recent ratification of the Constitution. Brown’s republican history narrative, then, functions according to a socioeconomic logic of republicanism based on Quaker principle of “‘free rational inquiry’ with one’s natural reason,”\textsuperscript{145} and that logic is applied to economics and social relations. Public right is determined economically and socially, not politically.

Working in a completely different genre, but producing a similarly republican history narrative, Alexander Hamilton’s 1790 \textit{First Report on the Public Credit of the United States} historicizes the early republic by recounting the country’s debts and taking inventory of its resources. Like Brown’s portrayal of public right, Hamilton’s notion of public right is cast in economic terms and ascribes power to the republican citizen;

\textsuperscript{143} Kamrath, \textit{Historicism of Charles Brockden Brown}, 22.
\textsuperscript{144} Shapiro, \textit{Culture and Commerce}, 274.
\textsuperscript{145} Kamrath, \textit{Historicism of Charles Brockden Brown}, 22.
however, whereas Brown correlates public right and citizenship, Hamilton correlates public right and financial means. Hamilton’s historical narrative paints a dire picture of early American finance: the country is terribly indebted and systematically incapable of relieving that debt. Hamilton proposes to remedy this problem by devising a complicated and nuanced system for revenue collection founded on the assumption of states’ war debts and full payment of war bonds, including interest. He proposed to finance this plan by imposing an excise tax on Whiskey, which eventually prompted the so-called Whiskey Rebellion. Although Hamilton’s Report proposed a political program that relied almost exclusively on executive power and supported Federalist policies, Hamilton’s text is decidedly republican: it produces a historical narrative in terms of systems and subjects, not cultural homogeneity or family origin.

Public Credit: Hamilton’s Financialization of American History

Tellingly, Hamilton’s Report provides the same type of comprehensive tabulation of state power as Boulainvilliers’s 1727 texts. In that sense, Hamilton’s Report is the perfect example of state knowledge producing state power. The First Report on the Public Credit of the United States has been described as one of the most brilliant financial analyses in American history. The Report was commissioned by the House of Representatives because the Federal Government was unable to repay wartime loans from France and make payment on domestically issued war bonds. This credit crisis
resulted in the highest inflation rates in the history of the United States, and made paper currency functionally useless. Specie - hard currency - thusly became the only stable and reliable currency for most of the country’s population, which dramatically limited the federal government’s ability to create purchasing power for its citizens. The specie shortage was particularly pronounced in lower class settlements removed from urban centers, especially in the backcountry, rural communities located in the piedmont and west of the Appalachian Mountains. In Western Pennsylvania, in fact, specie was so scarce and paper money so worthless that whiskey became region’s the de facto currency. In his Report, Hamilton successfully argued for the assumption of states’ war debts, regular interest payments on the expanded debt, and new customs laws and excise taxes. According to Hamilton, this package of legislation would consolidate the states’ war debts into a federal deficit that would be paid in steady, reliable payments funded by protectionist tariffs and excise taxes. Reliable payments on the federal deficit would encourage future loans from foreign governments and radically increase the value of paper money, which was functionally worthless at the time of this proposal. Thus, the Federal Government would repay its bondholders and creditors on the backs of western settlers and farmers, who would pay a disproportionate percentage of the country’s tax burden.

It was in this economic context that the House resolved that “an adequate provision for the support of the public credit is a matter of high importance to the honor

\[146\] *Founding Finance*, 165.
and prosperity of the United States,” and commissioned Hamilton’s Report. Historians generally concur that the Report is an incredibly important document in US history, but one that tends to be overshadowed by the more famous founding documents like the Declaration of Independence, largely because of the Report’s seemingly dry subject matter. William Hogeland, a progressive historian who tends to be critical of Hamilton’s financial program, derides the Report as “an impenetrable monolith to the many finance-challenged men present” for its reading in the House of Representatives. Hamilton’s audience, in fact, responded to Hamilton’s presentation of the Report with complete silence, which Hogeland interprets as befuddlement and intellectual exhaustion.  

Thomas McCraw, a more traditional economic historian, praises the report as “the most forceful and persuasive case” that Hamilton could make for his finance plan, and points out that the Report was presented to Congress under the guise of the Secretary of the Treasury’s annual report, a “provision [of the new government that] gave the treasury secretary the opportunity to initiate legislation, a power even Washington believed he himself did not possess as President.” Tellingly, these two scholars, who hold competing views on the merits of Hamilton’s financial program, stand in remarkable agreement about its intricacy, precision, and genius. They also point out two of Hamilton’s more adept political maneuvers: overwhelming a potentially obstructionist House with economic theory and extending executive power in a new and potent way.

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147 *Founding Finance*, 163.
Cast as a polemically attuned and successfully employed political tool occasioned by a particular moment in U.S. economic history, Hamilton’s written *Report* and oral report reveal a distinct shift in American history narratives, away from the Enlightenment-inspired patriotism found in texts like *Common Sense* and towards the more pragmatic political writing found in texts like Findley’s *History of the Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania*. In other words, Hamilton, the great Federalist theorist and politician, historicized the early republic in terms of system and class rather than social development, thereby coopting Brown’s virtuous republicanism for the purposes of consolidating wealth in an elite upper class. Thus, whereas Brown’s embrace of republican history writing evidences his support for individual thinking and natural reason – essentially, a social model predicated on widespread middle-class membership – Hamilton’s use of republican history writing mimics Brown’s model of dispersed economic power while consolidating wealth in a class of speculators and traders.

In this section, I read Hamilton’s *Report* as a republican narrative of early America. The report is an example of republican narrative because it narrates quantities and resources in order to propose a public policy; the report functions as a history

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149 Thomas Flemming, “Wall Street’s first collapse,” *American Heritage* 58.6 (Winter 2009): 55, offers a succinct summer of Hamilton’s strategy for redistributing money in the early republic: “Haunted by the memory of the financial collapse in the 1780s, Hamilton decided to concentrate the wealth of the new republic in the hands of a relatively few men so that the enation would have capital when and if it was needed. He decided to buy at par value the millions of dollars in promissory notes that the bankrupt Continental Congress and state governments had issued to soldiers, farmers, and other who had supported the Revolution,” most of which was owned by speculators aligned with Hamilton’s interest in designing an economy funded by a national debt.
narrative because it makes particular claims to public right, a province of historical
discourse. Specifically, the public right upon which Hamilton asserts his economic
program derives from the country’s representative democratic political system, which
authorizes legislation to be passed by elected representatives. Furthermore, because the
Report was commissioned by a body of elected representatives, we can say that it
produces state knowledge by using state power, and like Boulainvilliers’s report is
designed to further the interests of the ruling class. To this end, I argue that Hamilton
financializes the discourse of American labor and property as a means by which to
engender class-consciousness in his readers. In other words, Hamilton treats labor and
property as commodities and resources rather than as people and possessions in order to
encourage readers to enter his system of capitalist exchange. Maurizio Lazzarato
describes this type of sociopolitical relationship as “specific relations of power that entail
specific forms of production and control of subjectivity – a particular form of *homo
economicus*, the ‘indebted man.’”

The indebted man, Lazzarato continues, is subject to a “‘morality’ of debt [that]
results in the moralization of the unemployed, the ‘assisted,’ the users of public services,
as well as of entire populations… The debtor is ‘free,’ but his actions, his behavior, are
confined to the limits defined by the debt he has entered into. The same is true as much
for the individual as for a population or social group. You are free insofar as you assume
the *way of life* (consumption, working, public spending, taxes, etc.) compatibly with

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(Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012, 30-31.
reimbursement.” Applying Lazzarato’s theory to Hamilton’s Report, we can see the text implementing a political program that disposes of American subjectivity just as much as it reshapes the American economy. Specifically, the American subjects Hamilton writes in his Report are placed under moral obligations to behave certain ways and perform certain tasks. The creditor-debtor relationship that drives Hamiltonian financial citizenship operates according to a logic that, to borrow Lazzarato’s words, “very much resembles Foucault’s last definition of power: an action carried out on another action, an action that keeps the person over which power is exercised ‘free.’ The power of debt leaves you free, and it encourages you and pushes you to act in such a way that you are able to honor your debts.” This, then, was Hamilton’s vision for American citizenship: a population of ostensibly free economic agents collectively working towards a public ethos of fiscal responsibility. Americans might be rendered in print and publically described as political agents, as men entitled to all the rights and benefits of citizenship outlined in the Constitution, but in practice they amounted to names and figures on the country’s ledger.

Although administrative writing about labor and property in monetary terms was not inherently novel or new (managing local economies was a principal function of government long before the founding of the United States of America), Hamilton’s Report was the first document in U.S. history that introduced a financial program that had real effects on U.S. citizens. As such, Hamilton’s financialization of U.S. political

\[\text{Ibid}, 31\]

\[\text{Ibid}, 31\]
discourse carried over into the public sphere and permanently altered the ways in which Americans understood politics and their relationships with governments, an understanding theretofore conditioned by public right. By making a class-based claim to public right, Hamilton’s Report alters the discursive register of historical narrative, and authorizes and establishes a republican narrative history that is theoretically grounded in financial concepts and economic principals, not political subjectivity. As an artifact of republican history writing, this means that Hamilton’s Report embraces a class-based economic worldview in service of the political identity that defines early America.

Whereas national history narratives might celebrate ethnic and racial homogeneity while remaining neutral towards matters of class, republican history writing might celebrate economic heterogeneity while remaining neutral towards ethnicity and race.

Understanding Hamilton’s Report as a text that authorizes legislative policy and encourages class difference, it is not a stretch to consider backcountry revolts such as the Whiskey Rebellion as direct results of the financial program enacted by Hamilton’s Report.

Hamilton’s Report arrived at a pivotal moment in U.S. political history, when the first federal government was facing an economic crisis that seriously threatened the new country’s very existence. Circulating at that moment, the Report’s class-based economic worldview inspired an economically minded political discourse that – despite the enormity of Hamilton’s dismissal of U.S. political subjectivity – remained cast in the terms of republicanism. Whereas the Declaration authors asserted their right to political
independence and “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” in response to British taxation, Hamilton reduced those “unalienable rights” to numbers on a balance sheet.\textsuperscript{153} The Report, in other words, establishes and assigns a value for every potential resource and locates that value within a matrix of economic relations. Federal control over this value and strategic use of it will allow the United States to fund its war debt, effectively establishing the public credit for the foreseeable future. In other words, Hamilton’s Report is the moment when the “men [who] are created equal” by the Declaration, \textit{homo politicus} (man as a politically determined creature), assumes the responsibility of \textit{homo economicus} (man as an economically determined creature). This means that republican history writing produces narratives of class, not national identity. Hamilton’s vision of \textit{homo economicus}, however, is theoretically grounded in the notion of debt, not free exchange. This means that debt – not the earnings potential of free labor – will become the motivating factor in how early Americans come to understand their relationships with their governments and, more tellingly, the federal power with which they increasingly come into contact.

Hamilton’s Report employs a markedly different rhetorical appeal than most of its contemporary political rhetoric, which tended to appeal to Enlightenment values of representative and participatory government and an increasingly inclusive public political

Indeed, Hamilton’s report to Congress reads more like a mathematical treatise than a political assessment. The exhaustive schedules, tables, and budgets present an intricate, precise quantification of the new nation’s resources and outstanding debts:

In this table – the first, and simplest, of several in the Report – Hamilton calculates the total national debt as of about January 9, 1790. Although the arithmetic operations within the table are relatively simple, the figure descriptors require readers to engage in several complex mental processes. First, readers are directed refer to “Schedule B,” which does

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154 A particularly striking and revealing example of this contrast can be seen in a comparative reading of Washington’s farewell address, which warns against factionalism and appeals to listeners’ desire to continue a national-building project in which they are supposedly engaged. Available at “Washington’s Farewell Address,” The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, accessed 29 November 2014, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

not appear near the table. Next, readers are introduced to the concept of interest at a specified rate, and then directed to add the quantities. Between the foreign and domestic debt sections, Hamilton instructs readers that “The domestic debt may be subdivided into liquidated and unliquidated; principal and interest.” Here, Hamilton requires readers to be knowledgeable about managing “liquidated and unliquidated” debts in order to fully comprehend the sources of debt, and the impact that his plan for dealing with it might have on the sources. As Flemming points out, though, most of the domestic debt – the greater portion of the overall debt – originated with “the millions of dollars in promissory notes that the bankrupt Continental Congress and state governments had issued to soldiers, farmers, and other who had supported the Revolution,” most of which was owned by speculators aligned with Hamilton’s interest in designing an economy funded by a national debt.  

Thus, in the space of half a page, Hamilton reduces “soldiers, farmers, and others who had supported the Revolution” into “The principal of the liquidated part,” and a number, “27,383,917.74.” Moreover, the political language of government is replaced by the economic language of financial management. Hamilton’s Report is, then, in many senses, a complex and dynamic ledger that presents tremendous amounts of financial data and interprets that data in service of a financial program to be enacted through legislation cast in the language of republican politics.

Hamilton cleverly begins his Report by telling the House that he has compiled the report “in obedience” to their resolution that he develop “a proper plan for the support of

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the public credit.”  

Although these prefatory remarks seem innocuous and are, in fact, characteristic of government reports from this time period, it also seems important to note the explicit tone of deference these remarks strike: Hamilton, the financial specialist ordered by the House to devise a plan for the establishment of public credit, begins his report by telling the House what a good idea it was that they commissioned his Report, but immediately defers to “the superior judgment of the House.” In other words, Hamilton presents his Report to the House in response to their resolution and tells them what a good idea it was to commission the Report, but then defers to their “superior judgment” knowing that the Report’s financial program is already considered property of the House. Before the complicated calculations and exhaustive tables can even be presented, the House is confident that the Report’s policy proposals should be enacted because, after all, it was the House’s idea in the first place. In terms of public right and republican historiography, Hamilton’s preliminary remarks amount to a brilliant sleight of hand. Whereas the legislative authority required to enact Hamilton’s program resides in the House, a body of elected representatives, the political origin of Hamilton’s program resides in executive privilege. The Report relies on public right even as it exercises political power over public right. Tellingly, this rhetorical strategy plays out in

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the discursive tension between national discourse and republican discourse, especially in the introduction.

Hamilton begins his introduction,

In the opinion of the Secretary, the wisdom of the House, in giving their explicit sanction to the proposition which has been stated, cannot but be applauded by all who will seriously consider and trace, through their obvious consequences, these plain and undeniable truths:

That exigencies are to be expected to occur, in the affairs of nations, in which there will be a necessity for borrowing.

That loans in time of public danger, especially from foreign war, are found an indispensable resource, even to the wealthiest of them.

And that, in a country which, like this, is possessed of little active wealth, or, in other words, little moneyed capital, the necessity for that resource must, in such emergencies, be proportionally [sic.] urgent.

And as, on the one hand, the necessity for borrowing in particular emergencies cannot be doubted, so, on the other, it is equally evident that, to be able to borrow upon good terms, it is essential that the credit of a nation should be well established.

For, when the credit of a country is in any degree questionable, it never fails to give an extravagant premium, in one shape or another, upon all the loans it has occasion to make. Nor does the evil end here; the same
disadvantage must be sustained on whatever is to be bought on terms of future payment.

From this constant necessity of borrowing and buying dear, it is easy to conceive how immensely the expenses of a nation, in a course of time, will be augmented by an unsound state of the public credit.

To attempt to enumerate the complicated variety of mischiefs, in the whole system of the social economy, which proceed from a neglect of the maxims that uphold public credit, and justify the solicitude manifested by the House on this point, would be an improper intrusion on their time and patience.\textsuperscript{159}

Hamilton’s list of “plain and undeniable truths” and their “obvious consequences” presents his reader with what amounts to a reductive summary of abstract financial maxims that passes as a contingent justification for enacting a specific financial program. The first three statements can be summarily paraphrased as “This country has ‘little active wealth, or … moneyed capital,’ so it needed to borrow money to fight the Revolutionary War.” The next three statements tell the reader that the current debt will become exponentially worse the longer it remains outstanding, and that a failure to make payments on the current debt will make future loans (which, of course, the country will need) more expensive and burdensome, too. The final statement, tacked on to a list of otherwise self-explanatory premises, excuses the writer from the responsibility of

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Ibid}, 228-229.
“enumerate[ing] the complicated variety of mischiefs … which proceed from a neglect of the maxims that uphold public credit [because such an enumeration] would be an improper intrusion on [the House’s] time and patience.” In spite of this excuse – this recusal from a position of responsibility from which to fully inform his audience about the potential dangers of defaulting on public credit – Hamilton asserts that “the individual and aggregate prosperity of the citizens of the United States; their relief from the embarrassments they now experience; their character as a people; the cause of a good government” depend on the House instituting his financial program. Even if we go along with Hamilton and consider that Americans’ “character as a people” and “the cause of good government” depend on the House’s decision regarding the war debt, the stakes still seem sufficient enough to warrant a thorough examination of competing proposals for handling the debt. In other words, left unanswered through all of the Report’s prefatory remarks is the question of “What alternatives are there to funding the war debt with this proposed financial program?”

For all of Hamilton’s rhetorical flourish (which, at times, obscures his very specific arguments), the Report clearly states how particular citizens will benefit from the federal government’s assumption of the War debt and longer term institution of Hamilton’s financial plan. Some of the particular effects of this plan will be “to restore landed property to its due value … to cement more closely the union of the States”\(^{160}\) and to allow paper money to trade at full value to specie. These effects will benefit property

owners, merchants, commercial farmers and manufacturers, and moneylenders and speculators; “additional aids will be furnished to labor, to industry, and to arts of every kind.”\textsuperscript{161} In other words, the beneficiaries will be specific and limited classes of Americans, those engaged with “the channels of productive industry.”\textsuperscript{162} According to Hamilton’s model of financial citizenship, then, American political life more closely resembles the commoditized African bodies aboard the \textit{Zong} slave ship\textsuperscript{163} than “the fictive speaking voice of the written constitution… [the] publication [of which] comes literally to constitute the public.”\textsuperscript{164}

In \textit{Specters of the Atlantic}, Ian Baucom explores the commodification of bodies via the language of imperialism; specifically, Baucom considers the ways in which speculative trading throughout global empires and the insurance industry that developed to manage the corresponding financial risk encouraged the abstraction of bodies into money capital. With respect to a letter “calibrating a fine and exact scale of recompense for those far-flung workmen of the empire whose voices had been wounded in the service of the crown,” Baucom writes, “There is something … unnerving that exceeds the finicky mince of bureaucratic language, the formulaic translation of the loss of a foot, a thigh, a lung, or a bladder into a … financializing, decorporealizing logic of equivalence that so confidently translates a lieutenant’s foot into 5 shillings a day, clerk’s eyes into a one-

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 233-234.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 234.
\textsuperscript{164} Michael Warner, \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 96.
time payment of 40-pounds.” Hamilton’s *Report*, in a sense, performs a similar linguistic slight of hand when it represents war bonds – often used to pay soldiers in the Continental Army – as “liquidated and unliquidated, principal and interest” forms of debt. The labor of soldiers – a labor that necessitates the taking and giving of life, the destruction of bodies – is represented as a national burden, and managed according to a logic that rewards the speculative labor of bond traders who purchased the bonds at dimes on the dollar. In this way, Hamilton’s *Report* appropriates Warner’s “fictive speaking voice of the written constitution” in order to undermine the virtuous republicanism espoused by Brown. This appropriation changes the fundamental relationship between American citizens and the U.S. government from a political relationship to an economic relationship, and locates confines the imagined community of republicanism to Lazzarato’s world of the debt economy.

William Findley’s *History of the Insurrection*: A local history of national debt

The indebted citizen cannot have financial agency precisely because he is indebted, and because he cannot have financial agency, he cannot have political agency. Under these circumstances, the Constitutionally realized republican voice does not exist; the letters of the republic are inconsequential. This claim animates literary antifederalists like Brown, whose writings register the practical implications and social consequences of

Hamiltonian financial policy and Federalist politics, which often go hand-in-hand.

Another anti-Federalist, William Findley, critiques Federalist policies and financial citizenship in his 1796 *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania*. Findley’s *History* challenges the logic of Hamilton’s debt economy by countering Hamilton’s financial abstraction with historical specificity. In an especially pointed move, the introduction of Findley’s “own name and character … in the latter part of [his] work” was “necessary for [his] own vindication” because Hamilton and Brackenridge had misrepresented him, “with a view to cast an odium on Republican principles.” These statements challenge the validity of the abstract constitutional we and the financialization of U.S. citizens by insisting on the immediacy of a writer to his narrative; that is, Findley works against the disembodied public that figures prominently in Warner’s account of the republican print public sphere and Hamilton’s account of the national debt.

Findley’s history offers readers a narrative of public right in which republicanism prevails only so long as the political representation of American citizens remains faithful to the precise local interests and concerns of each region. The origin of public right, for Findley, is a type of virtuous republicanism analogous to Brown’s, but grounded in the certainty of identity and place rather than middle-class normalcy. Findley’s *History* explains – in meticulous detail – the social, cultural, and political origins of the Western

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Pennsylvania counties most responsible for the Whiskey Rebellion. Findley reveals the devastating toll that Hamilton’s excise tax took on those counties, and documents the local and state actions that Pennsylvanians took to contain and control the rebellion. He argues that those measures would have succeeded without federal intervention, which only intensified Western suspicion and distrust of the Federal Government. Although Findley’s history is in many ways a direct contrast to Hamilton’s, it is also a decidedly republican history. It treats individual families, people, and populations as distinct and sovereign entities connected only by the political systems designed to imbricate them with the new country. Together, these texts reveal many of the major characteristics of early American republican history writing; they also disagree on a number of political matters, and offer competing portrayals of public right in the new country, and reveal different perspectives on the role that public right might play in the development of the new country. As such, they demonstrate the degree to which republican government and historiography thrive on the discourse of dissensus and disagreement, which national history writing and nationalist political movements prefer to avoid.

William Findley was “Born in the north of Ireland” and “trained as a weaver. He had arrived in Pennsylvania at the end of the French and Indian War and plied his trade successfully enough to buy some land to farm on the side.” He was first elected to the Pennsylvania state government in 1783. Although Findley’s critique of moneyed interests

and patronage systems was similar to Herman Husband’s, Findley proved the more adept politician. In fact, Findley went on to a long career in state and Federal government. Hogeland describes Findley as a “populist leader who became a successful antifederalist and then a successful Jeffersonian Republican.” Hogeland adds that although Findley was a “fearless opponent … of Robert Morris and the bank, Findley was never a millennialist visionary like Herman Husband or a global liberator like Thomas Paine… [He] worked hard within existing systems to gain his working-class constituents incremental benefits by fighting privilege.” When Findley was later elected to the first U.S. House of Representatives, “he opposed Hamilton at every turn… [and was] awarded the title ‘Father of the House’ in 1811 in honor of his seniority.”

Prior to the Whiskey Rebellion, an uprising of rural farmers disproportionately impacted by the financial plan proposed in Hamilton’s Report, Findley “had long cautioned against rising to take the bait that he believed Alexander Hamilton and his Federalist allies had thrown out to prompt just such an armed protest… Rather than saving democracy, [Findley believed, Westerners] were playing right into Hamilton’s attempts to further scale it back.” Findley, then, was a prescient politician and an observant thinker, as well as a skilled communicator and negotiator.

In 1796, Findley published his *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Year 1796*, a 328-page “recital of the circumstances specially connected therewith: and an historical review of the previous situation of the

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country.”¹⁷¹ Findley hopes that the book “might be of use, to teach the citizens in other places, and perhaps in future times, the danger of small beginnings in making opposition to established laws, and of connecting their respect to the government, with the prejudices they may entertain against persons in office.”¹⁷² He also hopes that “It may also teach the lovers of order, the impropriety of affecting a neutrality of conduct, in the time of civil convulsion,” and that “A knowledge of [the Whiskey Rebellion] may be of use even to those who are intrusted [sic] with the administration of the government, if such a crisis should ever again happen, or rather for the salutary purpose of guarding against such emergencies.”¹⁷³ In other words, Findley imagines his History as a record of conflict between dissenting citizens and sovereign government, and a commentary on that conflict. Specifically, Findley hopes that his book will be read as a case study in what not to do during a period of civic unrest.

Significantly, Findley tells his story in terms of “citizens” and “characters,” terms that belong to the political register, not Hamilton’s financial lexicon. However, Findley’s History also details the economic hardships and political frustrations endured by the so-called Whiskey Rebels, most of whom had found themselves on the losing end of Hamilton’s financial program. To this end, Findley’s History offers a valuable retrospective on Hamilton’s Report. More than that, though, Findley’s History operates in an entirely different rhetorical mode than Hamilton’s Report. Whereas Hamilton’s Report

¹⁷¹ William Findley, title page to History of the Insurrection.
¹⁷² Ibid, ix.
¹⁷³ Ibid, ix.
functions as the kind of state sanctioned power knowledge that Foucault ascribes to hegemonic rule, Findley’s *History* functions as a kind of dissent discourse that is more concerned with amending the historical record than programmatically implementing a new political agenda. This difference is important because republican historiography delineates systems and classes rather than imaginary populations, and an analytical narrative concerned with people can be expected to design markedly different systems and classes than a theoretically attuned treatise concerned with financial matters.

Printed in Philadelphia by Samuel Smith, Findley’s *History* remains a widely cited account of the Rebellion. Findley wrote the *History* to correct misrepresentations of the Whiskey Rebellion, although that name was not yet used to describe the events. This applies to all involved, although he emphasizes the actors who represented republican interests. Findley dismisses the Whiskey Rebellion as a blip on the historical record; he doesn’t think that the Rebellion will be remembered as a significant mark against the temperate nature of American citizens. Findley cites the peaceful proceedings of the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention as evidence that Americans are a mild-mannered people, and argues that the Whiskey Rebellion was due to overzealous actors and political opportunists more than a widespread predisposition towards violence and intolerance among the majority of the population.

To this end, Findley’s “history of the western insurrection is also necessary, to correct wrong information that is gone abroad concerning it. Indeed,” he writes, “the citizens of the United States, having no authentic channels, through which to derive
information concerning it, can form their opinion only from desultory and unconnected reports.”  

Findley, then, is seeking to correct misrepresentations of “some material circumstances respecting” the Rebellion, and the people involved with it.  

Findley also argues that political process affects perceptions of character and reputation – he worries that misleading accounts of the Rebellion will encourage foreigners to view Americans as unruly and violent – which implicitly contradicts Hamilton’s assertions that the US public credit will determine foreign perceptions of American character. This contradiction points to a central tension within republican historiography: political citizenship vs. financial citizenship. Whereas Hamilton encourages readers to think about the republic as a financially ordered system, Findley encourages readers to think about the republic as a politically ordered system. Findley’s attention to political systems – specifically, the political failings leading up to the Whiskey Rebellion – is a hallmark of his work, and serves as compelling evidence of his narrative’s truth for readers considering his historical interpretation.

Findley asserts that Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s account of the Rebellion is useful, but inaccurate in several places because the account is “chiefly confined to what fell under his own observation, [and] is not sufficiently extensive in its plan… In some few instances, the facts are differently stated.” One of Findley’s main concerns is correcting Washington’s role in the history of the rebellion, specifically Washington’s

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174 Ibid, x.
175 Ibid, x.
176 Ibid, 10-11.
conferences with “the commissioners from the second Parkison ferry meeting,” which he argues have been downplayed in other accounts.177 This particular claim has held great sway amongst progressive historians, who argue that Washington more enthusiastically encouraged Hamilton’s response than previous generations have allowed.178 These arguments rely on Findley’s extensive account of a conversation with Washington, in which Washington “lamented the sacrifices that the farmer and merchant were under the necessity of making [for the purpose of joining the army to march on Western Pennsylvania], and the great expense that would be incurred to the government by the expedition.”179 Washington also refused to dismiss the army – even after receiving assurances from Findley and others that the insurrection was being contained by local militias – because “the preparation for an [army] expedition was the greatest part of the expense”180 and the army had already been assembled, so it might as well be deployed. Washington offers other support for his decision to continue with the army’s deployment, but all of his evidence tends to point to his conclusion that the enforcement process was already underway, so it needed to be carried out to its full extent.181 Washington is portrayed as a bureaucrat concerned with process and politics, not fair governance.

177 Ibid, 11.
179 Findley, History of the Insurrection, 170.
180 William Hogeland, Founding Finance, 171.
181 See Findley, Chapter 14, 169-190.
In basing his decision to continue the army’s deployment on financial matters rather than the principals of equality and justice – which supposedly underlie the Constitution – Washington aligns himself with Hamilton’s vision of financial citizenship. More than that, however, his refusal to acknowledge Findley’s claims – that the Rebellion is being controlled by local officials – seems to negate political discourse as a viable means of negotiation between state and federal officials. Progressive historians tend to emphasize this element of Washington’s role in the Whiskey Rebellion in order to argue that Federalist politics were, by and large, more about structuring the early American economy than organizing a stable political state.  

In his Preface, Findley describes states within the republic as countries within an empire, and carefully notes regional differences in population and culture. Although Findley later goes into great detail about the local economies in rural Pennsylvania, his primary concern here and throughout the text is with US political history and the ability of American political systems to represent diverse and competing interests. To this end, he emphasizes the different cultural backgrounds of early frontier settlers and lauds the equalizing potential of representative democracy. He writes,

Perhaps there is no nation on the earth, that has in so short a period experienced such various and interesting scenes as the people of the United States. Composed as they are of individual adventurers from different nations, or the descendants of such, and bringing with them the

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182 See footnote 67 for this list.
various habits and languages of the nations to which they had respectively
belonged, braving the horrors of the wilderness, and combating unaided
with savage tribes, they associated together in small dependent republics,
and always admitted the emigrants from other nations to a participation of
their privileges, and emigrants of different nations and languages attached
themselves to the society and soil, and soon learned to embrace the
country as if it had been their native land.183

Findley’s several uses of the term “nation” suggest several different understandings of
what the word might mean; it could refer to a country, population, or state. The word’s
first appearance seems to refer to the US state, but the later part of the sentence clearly
connects the term to the phrase “the people of the United States,” which emphasizes a
population. The word’s second appearance complicates the first appearance because it
points to the “different nations … to which [early Americans] had respectively belonged”
until “they associated together in small dependent republics,” which suggests that early
Americans renounced their nations of origin and chose to associate into a new nation.
This usage effectively refers to a country, population, and state. Tellingly, however,
Findley uses the phrase “small dependent republics” to describe individual states during
this time period, and ascribes the action of assimilation (“always admitted the emigrants
from other nations”) to those “small dependent republics,” not the nation as a whole. This
suggests an inversion of the functions normally ascribed to the nation and the republic:

183 William Findley, History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of
Pennsylvania in the Year M.DCC.XCIV, v.
the American nation is a political body that allows for various languages and cultures, and the states are populations concerned with protecting and managing local affairs and quotidian life. This attention to the several meanings of “nation” suggests that the term’s meaning was less fixed in Findley’s time than our, and that, by extension, eighteenth-century history narratives offer competing claims to the public right that constitutes political power.

Findley emphasizes the systemic origins of the material and cultural elements of Western Pennsylvanian society. This approach characterizes the republican characteristics of Findley’s historiography. In Chapter One, Findley explains the settlement of Pennsylvania’s four western counties. Pennsylvania purchased the land from the Indians on April 3, 1769, roughly twenty-five years before the Whiskey Rebellion, and roughly “several thousand locations were applied for on the first day” by eager homesteaders and frontiersmen. The majority of these claims were for land north of the Monongahela, in what was and remains Westmoreland Country (PA), which was the hotbed of the Whiskey Rebellion. Findley also tells readers that in 1774, Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia, opened a land sale office and undercut the Pennsylvania land price. This led to competing governments, neither of which was very effective. Many settlers bought their land from Virginia to save money. Whenever they had a complaint, settlers would go to whichever court they thought would be more sympathetic to their cause. Prior to 1774, many settlers opted not to pay the Pennsylvania

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government because they weren’t sure which state government would actually own the land. After 1774, Dunmore instigated an unprovoked war with the Indians. Without necessarily stating that the frontier settlers were shaped by governmental mismanagement and inefficiency, Findley still manages to make quite clear that the people who became the Whiskey Rebels had their attitudes towards governments shaped in a terribly dysfunctional environment. Because of this, and the absence of an established track record of insurrectionist violence, Findley concludes the chapter by stating, unequivocally, that “there was no necessity to call to their aid the authority of Congress, no armies had to be marched against them, nor any unconstitutional laws passed impairing the rights of contract in the favour.”¹⁸⁵ This conclusion is consistent with Findley’s concern throughout the text: the deployment of the army. Findley is quite clear that the Federal Government was within its rights to order the Whiskey Rebels to disband their militia, but disagrees with the method of enforcement. This analysis results in a prototypically republican conclusion: the system works, but the execution is faulty.

As Findley continues to provide the context of the Whiskey Rebellion and describe the events that unfolded in Western Pennsylvania, he takes care to ground observations about governance and remarks about societies, in general, in particular historical moments. Findley offers a particularly detailed account of the Pennsylvania state government’s response to the passage of the excise tax on whiskey, the central revenue raising provision of Hamilton’s financial program. Findley tells readers that

when Congress debated the federal excise tax, the Pennsylvania state government sent the U.S. Senate a declaration of the sense and wishes of the state of Pennsylvania respecting an excise system. The substance of these resolutions were: First, A declaration of a right in state legislature to give an opinion on every thing of a public nature which has a tendency to destroy the rights of the people. Second, That the proceedings of Congress, tending to the collection of a revenue by means of an excise, ought to attract the attention of the house: Third, That no public emergency then existed to warrant the adoption of an species of taxation, that would violate the rights which were the basis of the government, and thereby exhibit the singular spectacle, of a nation opposing the oppression of others, to enslave itself. Findley’s language demonstrates a keen awareness of the relationship between political bodies, legislation, and the quotidian activities of constituents’ lives. This awareness is especially evident in the state government’s third resolution, “That no public emergency then existed to warrant … [the violation of] the rights which were the basis of the government, and thereby exhibit the singular spectacle, of a nation opposing the oppression of others, to enslave itself.” This statement recognizes that rights originate with government, and acknowledges that emergencies might exist that would warrant the

suspension of some rights. Implicit in this acknowledgment is the opinion that the public credit crisis to which Hamilton proposed a solution was not an “emergency.” This opinion directly contradicts Hamilton’s statement that “the very character of Americans” depended on the maintenance of the public credit, or at least asserts that it was not the character of all Americans that depended on the public credit, or that the character of all Americans was not an especially important matter in the first place. Considering that Hamilton was personally and financially invested in the speculating and moneyed classes of Americans, and that most Pennsylvanians resided outside of the Philadelphia urban economy, the state government’s dissent towards Hamilton’s excise plan should be understood as a remarkably class-conscious and politically attuned statement inspired by the republican history narrative that most effectively characterizes the early republic.

Conclusions and Continuities: Making political sense of a complicated historical discourse

Hogeland’s characterization of Findley’s political career suggests that Findley carefully selected his battles and only engaged when victory might be attainable. Whereas an ambitious visionary like Alexander Hamilton eschewed compromise in the name of idealism, Findley embraced compromise in the name of pragmatism. This contrast between Findley and Hamilton speaks to a radical difference in how the two men thought about government and society. For Hamilton, the U.S. state provided an
opportunity to design a merchant oriented, market economy from scratch and implement a specific financial program to support it. For Findley, the U.S. state provided an imperfect mechanism to mediate quotidian affairs and foster a better life for its citizens. This divide is more than material; it speaks to two conflicting ways in which people think about governance and approach questions about governing a society. It poses the fundamental question: is government an instrument for ordering society according to class, or a system for managing relations between sovereign individuals? These positions lead to radically divergent modes of governance: improving the society in which we live necessitates a concern with law and order, process and procedure; reimagining society altogether necessitates a concern with social and economic values and the ends for which society exists.

The Whiskey Rebels – and Westerners in general – understood this all too well, according to George Washington, whose July 29, 1792 letter to Hamilton documents and summarizes twenty-one Western grievances that pointedly critique the philosophical foundations and practical manifestations of financial citizenship. Writing from Mount Vernon, shortly after returning from a fact-finding trip to the Western counties, Washington asserted that “sensible & moderate men – known friends to the government – … agree that the Country is prosperous and happy; but they seem to be alarmed at that system of policy, and those interpretations of the Constitution which have taken place in Congress. Others, less friendly perhaps to the Government, and more disposed to arraign the conduct of its Officers … enumerate a variety of matters” that have led to their
discontent. Their grievances ranged from general concern for the existing public debt (first grievance) and immediate increases to the public debt (fourth grievance), to alternate financial plans disregarded by Congress (fifth grievance) and future monetary policy (seventh through tenth grievances).

Westerners were most concerned, though, “That all the Capitol employed in paper speculation is barren & useless,” and that paper money “nourishes in our citizens vice & idleness instead of industry & morality” and “has furnished effectual means of corrupting such a portion of the legislature, as turns the balance between the honest Voters which ever way it is directed.” Specifically, they thought that paper money and the capital supporting it “[withdrew value] from Commerce and Agriculture where it would have produced addition to the common mass”; in other words, paper money rewarded speculative labor rather than productive labor, and thereby enriched the idle rich rather than the industrious working class. Moreover, Westerners thought that the ease with which paper capital could be exchanged would corrupt the entirety of Congress and cause “a change, from the present republican form of Government, to that of a monarchy.” In short, Westerners feared that Congress’s self-declared power to control the money supply would result in a self-perpetuating, corrupt ruling class that would, in short order, create a monarchy and revoke Americans’ constitutional rights and protections. Findley shared this concern, and Brown, too, considers the social ills encouraged by debt and avarice,

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which characterize most of the significant characters in *Arthur Mervyn*. Mervyn’s only redeeming virtue is his aversion to debt and avarice – we might also think of it as an indifference to class – and, indeed, it is this singular virtue that paradoxically delivers Mervyn to the middle class. In the cases of both Findley and Brown, literary antifederalism provides the means for provocative and insightful critique of the early republic economy.

Considering these three distinct narratives of republican history reveals the intersections of debt and political subjectivity, debt and republican governance, and debt and morality. Indeed, it is precisely because of its ideological incoherence with respect to political allegiance that republican history writing is, fundamentally, a discourse about debt. Republican history writing asserts public right according to economic relationships that have been mystified by Hamilton’s financialization of republican politics. For instance, *Arthur Mervyn* allows us to see Hamiltonian power-knowledge at work in a fictional character’s life; readers see first-hand the social impact of poverty, greed, and economic disparity. Thus, although Hamilton is the progenitor of financial citizenship and the indebted citizen, his *Report* produces a state sanctioned historical power-knowledge to be deployed according to republican logic. Debt, Hamilton argues, will bring together Americans in a unifying call to service – of the country’s debt. For Hamilton, it is in this capacity, and this capacity only, that Americans are political subjects. Mervyn himself, however, never quite comes to this conclusion: rather, he continues to think in terms of morality and ethics in spite of his financial hardships, and
thereby equates the discourse of finance and class with the discourse of ethics and morality. This conflation suggests two interpretations: one, Americans concern themselves with money and social status at the expense of morality and ethics; two, there really is no difference between fiscal and moral responsibility. Hamilton’s Report subscribes to the second interpretation (or at least a slight derivative of it), but Brown seems to cast his lot with the former; the moral critique of Arthur Mervyn is not sympathetic to a society that revolves around debt. Findley’s History takes a similar stance, and ascribes many of the misrepresentations of the Whiskey Rebellion to self-interested writers burnishing their own historical records. Specifically, Findley details how Westerners were programmatically indebted and systemically regarded as debtors. Their political capital was thereby devalued, and Western concerns were never seriously considered by a Federalist administration determined to exercise its military power.

In light of this discourse of debt, I argue that we must extend Warner’s claim that Arthur Mervyn is a republican – rather than national – novel, but do so while accounting for Hamilton’s financialization of the language of republicanism. The effect of this is to read the print public sphere not as a literary proving ground for a republican ethos, as Warner suggests, but as “a mythology of bourgeois benevolence,” to extend Shapiro’s description of Dr. Stevens.188 Whereas Benedict Anderson argues that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” and that “[the nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the

188 Shapiro, Culture and Commerce, 274.
actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship,”189 I argue that the republican communities imagined and described in republican history narratives are culturally and economically defined populations of real people in specific places, placed into political and financial relationships with other, distinct and defined populations with different interests, often at odds with one another. Contrary to Anderson’s claim that “print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language,”190 terms like “money” and “value” were understood quite differently in the Western counties than in coastal cities.

Moreover, whereas Anderson argues that the novel engenders nationalism via the imaginary community of the nation because “It is clearly a device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogeneous, empty time’” that is filled by “a sociological organism moving calendrically”191 through it, I argue that *Arthur Mervyn* presents an historical narrative in past time; that is, the events in *Arthur Mervyn* have already taken place and are no longer ongoing. There is no simultaneity to the novel; rather than offer readers a means to imagine other Americans – co-nationals – the novel offers readers a means to consider the morality of the 1793 yellow fever epidemic, which killed thousands of people in Philadelphia, alone. That population is not imaginary, and the avarice, deception, and self-interest displayed by Philadelphians with the means to protect themselves seems more indicative of a population struggling to survive than a community

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190 *Ibid*, 44.
of comrades. Similarly, my reading of *Arthur Mervyn* challenges Warner’s assertion that “print discourse made it possible to imagine a people that could act as a people and in distinction from the state.” Rather, my reading demonstrates that print discourse – republican history writing – was structured according to state-sanctioned, economically determined relationships between populations of debtors and creditors cast as political subjects, but never truly free from the stigma of debt, and thereby limited to merely a mythological representation in the federal government.

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192 Warner, xiii.
Chapter Three: *Thomas Paine and the Politics of Nation Making*

Thomas Paine’s fall from grace is a well-chronicled story that narrates Paine’s rise from working class printer to celebrity author of *Common Sense* to French National Convention delegate to Robespierre’s political prisoner, and, finally, to persona non grata in Federalist America. Indeed, Paine was almost destitute when he died, and was only allowed to return from France because of Jefferson’s victory in the election of 1800. In 1806, John Adams pointedly “railed that the latter part of the eighteenth century had come to be called ‘The Age of Reason’”.\(^{193}\)

> I am willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity, and would not object if you had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the Burning Brand from Bottomless Pit, or anything but the Age of Reason… I know not whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine… Call it then the Age of Paine.\(^{194}\)

Adams’s diatribe against the phrase “The Age of Reason” – even as he allows that the period under consideration might be called “the Age of Paine” – suggests that the second President of the United States objected more to the characterization of deism as reasonable than the celebration of Paine’s oeuvre. As a prominent Federalist and political

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\(^{194}\) Quoted in Lepore, pg. 70.
architect of the Alien and Sedition Acts, Adams might have been expected to object more to Paine’s populist ethos than any of his theories on religion or society. Such an expectation, however, would belie the complexity of Paine’s work and the sequence of his publications: “He wrote Common Sense, Rights of Man, and Age of Reason as a trilogy,”\(^{195}\) reveals historian Jill Lepore, which suggests that Paine understood freethinking, natural rights, and religious liberty as codependent, mutually constitutive elements of a modern democratic republic. In other words, Common Sense, Paine’s famous pamphlet that ardently supports American independence from Great Britain, should not be read as a standalone text, as Adams and his Federalist brethren might have preferred. Rather, Paine insisted on understanding the necessity of American independence as part of a larger, more radical project of social liberation that challenged socioeconomic hierarchies of all types.

Federalists such as Adams and Alexander Hamilton argued against Paine’s radical vision for a society shaped by the reasoned decisions of lower and middling Americans; instead, they argued that representative citizens elected by eligible voters should shape society. In practical terms, this meant that white male landowners would be able to select another white male landowner to represent everyone living in their electoral district. In An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution, historian Charles Beard argues that the “two fundamental parts” of the Federalist system of government are a powerful government able “to break the force of majority rule and prevent invasions of the

\(^{195}\) Ibid, 70.
property rights of minorities,” and “Restrictions on the state legislatures which had been so vigorous in their attacks on capital.”¹⁹⁶ For Beard, then, “The fundamental theory of political economy”¹⁹⁷ that informs the Federalist system represents economic interests in political terms, and the management of economic affairs – not the mediation of social conflicts – is its primary purpose. Moreover, Beard writes, this fundamental theory of political economy … was the basis of the original American conception of the balance of powers [of government, which produce an economic system in which] Property interests may, through their superior weight in power and intelligence, secure advantageous legislation whenever necessary, and they may at the same time obtain immunity from control by parliamentary majorities.¹⁹⁸

The Federalist system, then, is designed to encourage property ownership and serve the interests of capital through “the use of the sanctity and mystery of the law as a foil for democratic attacks.”¹⁹⁹ Constitutional law, according to Beard, is explicitly designed to “as a foil for democratic attacks” on the property rights of a small number of wealthy interests.

Richard Hofstadter concurs with Beard that “The Fathers, of course, were especially fearful that the poor would plunder the rich,” but also asserts that “most of

¹⁹⁷ Beard, An Economic Interpretation, 15.
¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 159-161.
¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 161.
them would probably have admitted that the rich, unrestrained, would also plunder the poor."\textsuperscript{200} Consequently, Hofstadter informs us, "A properly designed state, the Fathers believed, would check interest with interest, class with class, faction with faction, and one branch of government with another in a harmonious system of mutual frustration."\textsuperscript{201} In contrast to "a properly designed state … In a small direct democracy the unstable passions of the people would dominate lawmaking; but a representative government, as Madison once said, would ‘refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens.’"\textsuperscript{202} Thus, according to Beard and Hofstadter, representative democracy was the central concept of the Federalist Constitution, and the purpose of its system of representation is to negate sudden, mass democratic actions. Terry Bouton maintains a similar position, and concisely argues that “leading men in each state calling themselves Federalists decided to create a new national Constitution that barred states from passing popular economic policies and to establish a new federal government that would, in the words of Alexander Hamilton, contain ‘the amazing violence and turbulence of the democratic spirit.’”\textsuperscript{203} Federalism, then, and the representative democracy by which it manages the country, were designed precisely to

\textsuperscript{201} \textit{Ibid}, 9.
\textsuperscript{202} \textit{Ibid}, 9.
\textsuperscript{203} Terry Bouton, \textit{Taming Democracy} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 176.
derail the brand of direct democracy and radical action advocated by Paine. Or, in the words of James Madison, “to break and control the violence of faction.”\footnote{Madison, James. \textit{Federalist 10}. Accessed online at http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_10.html.}

This system of representative democracy was the central concept of the Federalist Constitution, and Madison, Hamilton, and Jon Jay devoted themselves to its advocacy in \textit{The Federalist Papers}. In \textit{Federalist #10}, James Madison describes the dangers of factions, generally, and socioeconomic factions, specifically. Madison defines factions as “a number of citizens … who are united and actuated by some common impulse or passion, or of interest, adversed [sic.] to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”\footnote{Madison, James. \textit{Federalist 10}. Accessed online at http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_10.html.} That is, a faction cannot help but impinge on the rights of citizens not included in that faction. As such, Madison argues that factions are destructive because they encourage groups of citizens to pursue their personal interests at the expense of others’ personal interests, and to prioritize selective interests rather than common interests. Madison explains that “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property,” and that “Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.” Class difference, then, bears most of the responsibility for factional conflict. Finally, according to Madison, “The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party
and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.”206 Read in these terms, government’s primary purpose is to prevent class warfare.

Together, Madison’s statements demonstrate that the protection of private property and the existence of property rights underlie many manifestations and functions of Federalist government. In the Federalist system, government manages human affairs, but reads human affairs through the lens of property rights; and, because property rights always will be distributed unequally, government will manage human affairs differently, according to the varying levels of property rights. Madison theorizes a political system in which property rights are portrayed as citizens’ rights, and citizens’ rights apply to property, not people. Effectively, then, the language of Madison’s Federalism reveals a system of property management, not population management. Madison says as much when he characterizes different levels of property ownership as different factions of society, and argues that the purpose of government is to negate the violence that originates in factional differences: “Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views.”207 In this passage, Madison maintains that economic inequality is inherent in socioeconomic development, and that Americans at the top and bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy are susceptible to the factional violence of the other classes.

206 Ibid.
207 Emphasis mine
Surprisingly, however, Madison claims that this theory of government protects the poor against the wealthy, as well as the wealthy against the poor. Madison supports his claim with the observation that “Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination.” In reality, though, the “discrimination” faced by debtors could not have been less “like” the “discrimination” faced by creditors: debtors went to prison, and creditors went to Congress. Indeed, Madison’s position is tenable only because of his earlier statement that competing class interests produce factional violence; that is, Madison reads instability in human affairs as the result of competing factions, which largely result from class difference. Consequently, Madison theorizes a political system that manages class difference in an attempt to mitigate factional difference, and thereby stabilize social relations. The economic corollary to Madison’s political system is a stable class system in which different classes will have access to different economic resources, but class mobility can only result from social instability, which is discouraged in the interest of civic unity.

Another way to pose the Federalist model of governance is to say that the Federalists were interested in governing by representative consensus rather than complete consensus; indeed, the U.S. Constitution allows for a representative democracy, not a direct democracy. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick approach this contrast in terms of the framers’ socioeconomic position relative to most other Americans, and point to several common traits found throughout the Federalist as evidence of representative consensus: they write,
It is obvious, for instance, the world in which [the framers] functioned was hardly a ‘democratic’ world … but an elite one, and that the pseudonymous collective author ‘Publius’ … was unaffectionedly candid about this. A key theme was public service by men whose special merits an expanded commonwealth might make more available than they currently seemed to be… But it seems that the people’s virtue was still primarily to be thought of as their capacity less to act than to choose wisely, ‘to obtain rulers,’ as Madison put it in Number 57.208

Following Elkins and McKitrick, the difference between representative democracy and representative consensus is more than semantic: under federalism, elected representatives are not mere vassals of their constituents; rather, elected representatives constitute the public will, and the people are ruled. Remembering Madison’s portrayal of faction, then, and Hamilton’s financialization of citizenship,209 elected representatives functionally control the distribution and management of property. Writing in 1787, in the wake of Shays’ Rebellion and other backcountry revolts carried out by indebted farmers furious with Confederation-era monetary policy, Madison must have considered the continued escalation and intensification of class-based violence while writing Federalist #10. However, Madison’s claim that Federalism negates “the spirit of party and faction” quickly falters when considered in the historical contexts of the Whiskey Rebellion and

209 See Chapter Two of this dissertation.
the relatively prosperous 1790s. Indeed, the Whiskey Rebels’ primary complaint was not that too few men maintained too much property, but that their own economic mobility was not a concern of the federal government, and that their complaints about that matter were not taken seriously. Madison’s fear of factions, then, was quickly proven to be ungrounded: the Whiskey Rebellion was crushed, and property rights were maintained. Madison’s attention to the divisive power of class difference, however, proved far more prescient, and anticipated the elite response to *The Age of Reason*.

In *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine espouses the virtues of deism, denounces Judeo-Christian orthodoxy, and condemns establishment religious beliefs and practices. One of Paine’s more inflammatory statements arrives in the text’s introduction, and it combines Paine’s personal disavowal of mainstream American religion with a broader condemnation of religion’s effect on human society:

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, not by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit… It is necessary to the happiness of man that he be mentally faithful to himself… It is impossible to calculate the moral mischief … that mental lying has produced in society… [A man] takes up the trade of a priest for the sake of
gain, and in order to qualify himself for that trade he begins with a perjury.

Can we conceive any thing more destructive to morality than this?\textsuperscript{210}

In this brief passage, Paine declares himself a nonbeliever, denounces state-sponsored religion, equates religious belief with “mental lying,” and questions the professional motivations of clergy. These statements cast aspersions on the faith-based institutions that brought together thousands of groups of believers in the early Republic, as well as the clergy who occupied prominent positions within those institutions. These religious leaders often held a great deal of political influence, so Paine’s two-pronged invective against religion and religion’s imbrication with state policy amounted to an attack on their entire careers. This stance earned Paine few friends and little public sympathy: in fact, \textit{The Age of Reason} thoroughly ruined Paine’s name and reputation throughout most of the early Republic.

In “The Age of Paine,” Jill Lepore describes Paine’s final years, spent “in a tavern in New York, so drunk and disoriented and unwashed and unkempt that his toenails had grown over his toes, like bird’s claws… [When] Paine hobbled to the polls in New Rochelle to cast his vote in a local election[,] he was told that he was not an American citizen, and turned away.”\textsuperscript{211} Paine’s last days, then, hardly amount to the glorious end we might expect of a formerly beloved public figure, one who led public movement towards support of the American Revolution. Lepore’s description of Paine’s sorry state


\textsuperscript{211} Lepore, “The Age of Paine,” 70.
of affairs emphasizes Paine’s political exile and public fall from grace, both of which Lepore attributes to Paine’s disestablishment religious views, published in his *Age of Reason*. Because of Paine’s time spent in France with members of the Revolutionary government, Paine also faced accusations of Jacobinism and atheism, which further sullied his reputation. Ultimately, Paine was denounced throughout the early Republic as an example of everything that might go wrong in America if the revolutionary impulses of the 1770’s were allowed to continue, unchecked.

Most of the accusations against Paine were fabrications intended to discredit the anti-authoritarian worldview he announced in *Common Sense* and espoused through and after *The Age of Reason*, and they came from both sides of the Atlantic. Lepore notes that, after the publication of *The Rights of Man*,

William Pitt’s government hired hack writers to conduct a smear campaign, which asserted, among other things, that Paine – horribly ugly, smelly, rude, and relentlessly cruel, even as a child – had committed fraud, defrauded his creditors, caused his first wife’s death by beating her while she was pregnant, and abused his second wife, almost as badly, except that she wasn’t really his wife because he never consummated that marriage, preferring instead to have sex with cats.  

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This type of response continued after the publication of *The Age of Reason*, when Samuel Adams “seethed, ‘Do you think that your pen, or the pen of any other man, can unchristianize the mass of our citizens?’” While Lepore reads Samuel Adams’s admonition as evidence of the Christian sensibility that Paine offended with *The Age of Reason*, I argue that Adams’s response, and others cast in a similar mold, were primarily motivated by the pamphlet’s broader skepticism of socially and politically determined positions of power.

Specifically, I argue, *The Age of Reason* encouraged readers to be skeptical of people in powerful positions who owed their positions to the religious beliefs of their followers. Paine argued that powerful public positions should be allocated on the basis of public decisions made according to the reason and logic of the general public, rather than the religious faith of parishioners at influential churches. This argument, an updated framing and application of Paine’s earlier position in *Common Sense*, in which Paine theorized that any man could use “reason” and “feelings” to interpret “simple facts, [and] plain arguments” about colonial governance in order to arrive at an informed and politically actionable conclusion, supposes that everyone – not only elites and wealthy land owners, but also member of the middling and lower classes – is capable of making rational decisions about how their society ought to be governed, and that society’s interests are best served by decision makers who represent the entire population.

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213 Ibid, 94.
including the disenfranchised and dispossessed. It was this latter argument that incurred the ire of Federalists, particularly, and elites throughout the early Republic, and ultimately led to Paine’s downfall.

Beginning with *Common Sense* and working through *The Age of Reason*, I demonstrate the centrality of class-consciousness to Paine’s work in order to reveal a mutually constitutive relationship between Paine’s class-consciousness and Paine’s democratization of American political language. That is, Paine democratizes American political language because of his class-consciousness, and Paine’s class-consciousness becomes increasingly provocative as he develops a democratic language for American politics. Read alongside Federalist texts like Madison’s *Federalist #10* and Alexander Hamilton’s *First Report on the Public Credit of the United States of America*, which theorize a political system designed to encourage the accumulation of wealth, and antifederalist texts like William Findley’s *History of the Insurrection* and Herman Husband’s *A Fan for Fanning*, which critique political theories concerned with the accumulation of wealth, Paine’s texts help us to better understand the process by which American political language was designed to represent lower and middling class interests, and subsequently revised to occlude lower and middling class interests. In turn, this reading of Paine’s texts invites new readings of literary texts such as Phillis Wheatley’s

Poems on Various Subjects, which conceptualizes sentimental experiences as products of class relations.

Exploring The Age of Reason and Common Sense in this context, I consider Paine’s critical portrayal, which emphasizes his role as a printer, political activist, and political theorist, while – as Ed Larkin argues – overlooking Paine’s role as a writer and rhetorician. Larkin argues that Paine invented “a new language that presented politics in a vernacular that artisans and other middling sorts were already accustomed to reading.” That is, Paine recognized the need for a more widely informed public and used his skills as both a rhetorician and a printer to design a product – Common Sense – that met that need. This product disseminated Paine’s new language throughout the American colonies, where Paine’s political vernacular permeated every nook and cranny of American political discourse; Larkin continues, “By 1791, [Paine] had sold more books than anyone else in the history of publishing… Paine’s texts not only sold, they shaped the major debates of the age.” Tellingly, though, Paine’s populist appeal was what made Common Sense the most commercially successful pamphlet on American independence, and what led more conservative advocates of independence like John Adams to publicly refute some of Paine’s specific suggestions. In Larkin’s words, “Paine’s success was largely predicated on his ability to present sophisticated political

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216 Ibid, 2.
217 Ibid, 7-8.
218 For details on Adams’s differences with Paine, see Larkin, 8-10.
ideas to a general readership... At the same time, however, it soon becomes difficult [for Paine’s readers] to separate facts from arguments, and arguments from what [Paine] insists are the intuitive and self-evident perceptions of common sense. This is exactly the point [of Paine’s rhetorical strategy].”

In other words, Paine did more than appeal to an uneducated – a “common” – audience: he transformed political discourse into a conversation accessible to the masses.

Building on Larkin’s claim, I read Common Sense’s popularity as evidence that Paine produced a clear and coherent theory as to how an economically disadvantaged population could emphasize common interests in the service of collective action. Specifically, I argue that Paine’s democratizing rhetoric suggested that American colonists could collectively set aside individual ambitions in order to achieve the mutually beneficial and desirable outcome of self-governance. My argument extends the foundational claim of Larkin’s argument – that Paine democratized American political discourse – to include early American economics as well as politics. In other words, I take what Larkin presents as a fundamentally political argument and apply it to economics. Larkin approaches this question with respect to the bourgeois character of the print public sphere: he writes, “Paine recognized that separating a consideration of authors from the ideas they advance would allow the elites to retain control over the

public sphere by encouraging the notion that they were disinterested writers, and reminds us that in “classical republicanism, only the wealthy … were truly disinterested” because only the wealthy were fully removed from the day-to-day struggle for survival that characterized life in the eighteenth-century.

For Larkin, Paine’s democratization of political rhetoric stems from Paine’s dual identities as a printer and writer; Paine understood the economics of printing and publishing, and took ownership of his political rhetoric in an attempt to democratize the public sphere as well as the language of politics. Larkin’s position finds economic concerns in Paine’s career, but stops short of reading Paine’s pamphlets as theories of class formation or economic critiques of government. In contrast to this, my reading of Paine finds an underlying logic of collective action in Paine’s argument that Americans could govern themselves. Americans could only govern themselves, Paine says, because they can act collectively, and Paine’s portrayal of collective action, I argue, invited economically minded readings as well as strictly political readings. Effectively, this means that readers of Common Sense exposed themselves to Paine’s class-conscious worldview just as much as his argument for American independence, and implies that Paine’s rhetoric engendered animosity towards the wealthy along with rebellious sentiments of independence.

Like Larkin, Amanda Porterfield portrays Paine’s writing as hostile towards a prevailing elitist influence on public thought; however, whereas Larkin points to Paine’s

\[220 \text{ Ibid, 15.} \]
\[221 \text{ Ibid, 16.} \]
democratization of American political rhetoric, Porterfield shows that Paine worked against organized religious movements in order to challenge Christian orthodoxy.

Porterfield argues that Paine employed a dual conception of “reason as the organizing principle of nature … [and] reason as an activity of mind… in a political attack on Christianity and biblical revelation... [that] sharpened the division in public opinion over the meaning of democracy.”222 Agreeing with Porterfield, I contend that *The Age of Reason* prompted debate and criticism about American democracy throughout the country, especially over the role of state-sponsored religion in local politics; however, I argue that, additionally, *The Age of Reason* rethinks American politics as a system of representation for class interests, rather than a praxis for popular sovereignty. In attacking biblical revelation, Paine also attacks many of the prevailing assumptions of a normative social order – such as the respect commonly afforded to local ministers – that previously had done much of the work of organizing revolutionary era society. Porterfield’s argument supports this reading, but she considers Paine with respect to a larger trend towards doubt and skepticism in American religious practices. I extend Porterfield’s argument about skepticism towards religious institutions to make an argument about skepticism towards economy mobility in *The Age of Reason*.

Like Larkin and Porterfield, William Hogeland, Alfred A. Young, Ray Raphael, and Gary B. Nash also portray Paine as hostile towards concentrated wealth and elite influence on public matters. Hogeland characterizes Paine as a somewhat rare commodity

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in eighteenth-century America, a famous, but unmoneyed, political figure. Hogeland writes, “After victory over England, Paine was at loose ends and broke. Huge sales of *Common Sense* and ‘The Crisis’ hadn’t brought financial security; the better to disseminate inspiration, [Paine had] placed his work in the public domain and donated any royalties to supplying soldiers in the field.”

Hogeland argues that Paine’s poor financial state inspired him to return to Europe in the hopes of improving his economic condition, and reads Paine’s support for the French Revolution as an extension of Paine’s lifelong project towards an egalitarian government. Young, Raphael, and Nash describe Paine as the revolutionary era’s “best-known radical,” and argue that “he has been badly misrepresented” as only a figure of American independence; rather, they suggest, “Paine wanted much more than national independence for the Americans. In *Common Sense* he proposed that each state establish a single-house legislature based on a broad suffrage… [and] In *The Age of Reason* he” encouraged Americans to rebel against a church-based power that he characterized as terrifying and oppressive.

Drawing on these historians’ characterizations of Paine, as well as Porterfield’s and Larkin’s assessments of Paine’s writings, I show how Paine’s democratization of American political rhetoric and deistic advocacy suggest a theory of class emerging in Paine’s writings.

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Part One: Common Means and *Common Sense*

*Common Sense* was Paine’s first major entry to the colonial conversation on American independence; in many ways, *Common Sense* actually initiated the conversation about American independence, and Paine’s career-long success corresponded to the text’s significance. According to Ed Larkin, “By 1791, [Paine] had sold more books than anyone else in the history of publishing… Paine’s texts not only sold, they shaped the major debates of the age.” Tellingly, though, Paine’s populist appeal was what made *Common Sense* the most commercially successful pamphlet on American independence, and what led more conservative advocates of independence like John Adams to publicly refute some of Paine’s specific suggestions. In Larkin’s words, “Paine’s success was largely predicated on his ability to present sophisticated political ideas to a general readership… At the same time, however, it soon becomes difficult [for Paine’s readers] to separate facts from arguments, and arguments from what [Paine] insists are the intuitive and self-evident perceptions of common sense. This is exactly the point [of Paine’s rhetorical strategy].” In other words, Paine did more than appeal to an uneducated – a “common” – audience: he transformed political discourse into a conversation accessible to the masses.

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227 For details on Adams’s differences with Paine, see Larkin, *Thomas Paine*, 8-10.
Paine begins the introduction to *Common Sense* with the observation that “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.” Immediately, then, the American colonies are not an isolated, lonely community, but part of the larger population – “mankind” – and working towards a common cause. Paine elaborates,

Many circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested. The laying a Country desolate with Fire and Sword, declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind, and extirpating the Defenders thereof from the Face of the Earth, is the concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling; of which Class, regardless of Party Censure, is the Author.²²⁹

Here, Paine employs the term “Class” to refer to “every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling,” a population with “universal… concern[s]” about “War against the natural rights of all Mankind.” Nationality, then, is not the most powerful or even the best tool for organizing humans; more specifically, in this passage, Paine addresses “Common Sense” not to colonists seeking political independence, but a class of mutually sympathetic individuals, what Adam Smith calls a community structured according to

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“the pleasure of mutual sympathy,”\textsuperscript{230} one composed of people from societies all over the world. This coming together, Paine explains, occurs in spite of governments’ best efforts to maintain control over their own societies; Paine describes society as a “blessing” and government as “a necessary evil.”\textsuperscript{231} Moreover, according to Paine, “Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise.”\textsuperscript{232} In other words, government would be unnecessary in a perfect world because people would be conscientious and kind.

Paine, then, conceives of “common sense” as a political philosophy addressed to a class of conscientious, like-minded people who want to coexist harmoniously and peacefully, and apart from the trappings of government, which unnaturally divides people and pits them against one another to preserve the power of kings. Understood in this way, “common sense” is as much about rearranging societies as it is about thinking through a problem. Against the power of kings and its divisive impact on society, Paine posits, “Mankind [were] originally equals in the order of creation.” Moreover, Paine claims, “equality could only [have been] destroyed by some subsequent circumstance; the distinctions of rich and poor.”\textsuperscript{233} These claims actually confirm Madison’s assertion in \textit{Federalist #10}, “The protection of … the diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate … is the first object of government.” Unlike Madison,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{230} Adam Smith, \textit{The Theory of Moral Sentiments} (Mineola, New York: Dover Philosophical Classics, 2006), 8.
\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Ibid}, 66.
\textsuperscript{232} \textit{Ibid}, 66-67.
\textsuperscript{233} \textit{Ibid}, 71.
\end{footnotesize}
however, Paine thinks that the protection of inequalities is a bad government policy, and will lead to an oppressive society; Paine writes, “Oppression is often the consequence, but seldom or never the means of riches.” For Paine, protecting “the diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate” will perpetuate factional differences due to economic inequality, not combat them. Here too, however, Paine and Madison generally agree: Madison writes, “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an ailment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.” Faction, then, cannot be removed from society; instead, Madison suggests, “The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man” in the form of “fallible” “reason” derived from “self-love.” Thus, government’s proper role is to control, not to eliminate, the resulting factions.

Madison’s assessment that man’s reason is “fallible” because of his “self-love” proposes a theory of reason completely different from Paine’s. Whereas Paine proposes a theory of reason based on “common sense” – a way of thinking shared by all humans – Madison proposes a theory of what we might call “uncommon sense” – a way of thinking only available to certain humans. These contradictory theories of reason inform Paine and Madison’s contradictory theories of government: according to common sense, humans are equally capable of self-governance; according to uncommon sense, not all humans are

\[\text{Ibid, 71.}\]
capable of self-governance. Politically, this amounts to the difference between a representative democracy and a direct democracy, with Madison supporting a representative democracy and Paine supporting a direct democracy. However, this comparison elides the economic dimension of both Paine’s and Madison’s position; indeed, Paine presents his theory of common sense under the auspice of encouraging a naturally occurring equality - “Mankind [were] originally equals in the order of creation”\textsuperscript{235} – and Madison presents his theory of uncommon sense under the auspice of mitigating the effects of a naturally occurring inequality. Paradoxically, Paine and Madison share a common goal – an equitable society – even though they propose different types of equality.

Paine’s insistence that common sense is, indeed, common, assumes that every person possesses the means – both rational and economic – to make a reasonable decision. “Common sense,” then, depends on “common means,” and, by implication, “uncommon sense” depends on “uncommon means.” For Paine, then, the commonality of common sense makes common sense more complicated than a reasoning process or a political theory: common sense is a value-laden foundation for a community based on common means, a community that functions just as well as a community based on uncommon means. Assuming that the independent colonies will structure their federal government according to principals of common sense, Paine writes, “Our plan is commerce, and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of all

\textsuperscript{235} \textit{Ibid}, 68.
Europe; because it is the interest of all Europe to have America a *free port.*”

“Commerce” and “the peace and friendship of all Europe” are the principal rewards of American independence, and outcomes of common sense government. This causational logic suggests that Paine’s common sense politics will lead to the kind of “mutual sympathy” that Smith points to as the underlying reason for bonds between men.

Accordingly, common sense renders complex schemes of government, like Federalism – and the complex logical manipulations required to construct them – superfluous and obsolete. Moreover, common sense challenges the belief that the uncommon means are required to successfully design a political system and govern a community. Thus, according to Paine, sophisticated reasoning like Madison’s political theory in *Federalist #10* is actually nothing more than intellectual sleight of hand that obviates the simple facts that enable common thinkers and self-governors to reach logical decisions. Larkin argues that “Paine insists upon simplicity as a fundamental value” in order to demonstrate that “dichotomies have rendered the world (government, religion, politics, society, and so on) unnecessarily complex by creating a tangled web of artificial systems to prop up the elite’s claim to preeminence.”

In other words, common sense resists “dichotomies” – products of uncommon sense – in order to challenge “the elite’s claim to preeminence,” a product of uncommon means. Left unsaid in Larkin’s claim is that it is the work of human institutions to produce the “tangled web of artificial systems

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to prop up the elite’s claim to preeminence,” and that the human institutions that surrounded Paine depended on property, and capital, for their existence. In The Age of Reason, Paine critiques revelation as a means to disentangle the lies of the artificial system of Christianity: Paine writes, “It is a contradiction in terms and ideas, to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second-hand, either verbally or in writing. Revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication – after this it is only an account of something which that person says was a revelation made to him.” Paine adds that “[he has] no other authority for [revelation] than some historian telling me so,” and insists that revelation, as presented in Christianity, is nothing more than a “theory … sprung out of the tail of the heathen mythology.”

Paine’s critique of revelation refutes Christian revelation as unreliable because church historians, who cannot be trusted, have overcomplicated it. In contrast to those historians, Paine appeals to a class of common thinkers, of which he counts himself a member, and asserts, “I have a right to believe [the church historians] or not… [their evidence] is hearsay upon hearsay, and I do not choose to rest my belief upon such evidence.” Although Paine critiques revelation as “hearsay,” he does not logicallydisprove revelation; rather, he insists on his “right to believe it or not.” In this argument, Paine is not refuting Christian doctrine so much as he is distancing himself

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238 Ibid, 10.
240 Ibid, 403.
241 Ibid, 403.
242 Ibid, 403.
from it. Indeed, Paine’s resort to the phrase “I have a right to believe” suggests that Paine understood his conclusions about revelation as his own property, to use as he decided; Paine does not passively receive an accurate perspective on revelation so much as he insists on the independence of his reason and his capacity to make his own decision.

Ultimately, then, “the elite’s claim to preeminence” is predicated on capital and property rights, and Paine’s critique of the “tangled web of artificial systems” critiques uncommon means – of capital and property rights – just as much as it critiques the uncommon sense of complex language. That is, Paine appeals to a class of common thinkers, whose economic interests are opposed to the elite architects of the “artificial systems” that unnaturally stratify society. From this perspective, Madison’s political theory in Federalist #10 becomes a means of exclusion by which common thinkers and common property holders – to say nothing of those people who possessed no property, or debtors, who possessed negative property – are figuratively written out of the Federalist government, and effectively restricted from attaining the necessary means to contest their exclusion. Read as Madison’s theoretical treatise on debt and political agency, Federalist #10 suggests that the Federalist model of government is predicated on the ability of political subjects to incur and repay debts; that is, the Federalist political system is only accessible to individuals who have successfully borrowed and repaid money. Effectively, Federalism establishes a political economy of exception.

\[243\] Larkin, Thomas Paine, 10.
Paine and Madison’s competing models of government point to their different assumptions about nature, and, by extension, the nature of democracy. Jacques Ranciere asserts that “Modern ideas of democracy [have tended to identify] democracy either with the self-regulation … of dispersed focuses of use and profit, or with the power of the law which institutes collective sovereignty by submitting the particular to the universal.”

*Common Sense and Federalist #10*, written in 1775 and 1787, respectively, anticipated the theoretical foundation for Ranciere’s two identifications of democracy. Indeed, Paine’s notion of common sense argues for “self-regulation,” and Madison’s notion of uncommon sense argues for “collective sovereignty by submitting the particular to the universal.” Ranciere, however, rethinks the opposition between these models:

“Democracy is neither the consensual self-regulation of the plural passions of the multitude of individuals nor the reign of a collectivity unified by law under the shadow of Declarations of Rights… [rather, it is predicated by] the power to undo all partnerships, gatherings, and ordinations,” and manifests as division, not unity. Reading division rather than unity in Paine and Madison’s political theories reveals the different stakes of each writer: Paine sought to divide property, Madison sought to divide power. Within the context of the debt economy of the 1780s, these stakes take on additional dimension: Paine’s stakes were material, whereas Madison’s stakes were theoretical. That is, Paine’s stakes applied to the management of bodies and populations and living conditions,

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whereas Madison’s stakes applied to the management of representations of bodies and populations and living conditions. Paine’s discussion applies to the material world of revolutionary era America, and Madison’s discussion applies to the theoretical world of political thought. Thus, although Paine and Madison seem to be at odds over how to most effectively structure American government, their debate actually points to a far simpler, but more fundamental, relationship within American society: the individual and the community.

Part Two: Rethinking Class with Paine’s Age of Reason

In The Making of the Indebted Man, Maurizio Lazzarato describes the exploitive relationship between debt economies and subjectivity: “The debt economy … is characterized by a twofold expansion of the exploitation of subjectivity: extensive … and intensive.”246 The exploitation is extensive insofar as it affects the working conditions in which debt is incurred and produced, and intensive insofar as it affects “the relationship to the self … who is at once responsible for ‘his’ capital and guilty of poor management.”247 Thus, in the debt economy, financial accountability effaces human life as the basis for political subjectivity. Moreover, in the debt economy, the political subject cannot escape the debtor paradigm: he is, first and foremost, always a debtor, even if he has discharged his debts. That is, the debtor is expected to default on his payments, and

247 Ibid, 52.
thereby undermine his political agency; subsequently, he also resigns from the body politic. In this world, the world of the debt economy, theoretical distinctions - such as those proposed by Madison - are meaningless because they cannot “create a rupture” in “the economic, the social, [and] the political” processes of “subjectivation.”\textsuperscript{248} In other words, Madison’s theory of Federalism relies on the very economic, social, and political sources of faction it sets out to mediate, and does not offer a strategy by which a subject can resist these classifications. Madison relies on uncommon sense and uncommon means, and designs a community for uncommon people. In contrast to Madison’s uncommon position, Paine’s common sense model of government defies capitalism’s “ability to link ‘economics’ … and the production of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{249} That is, Paine maintains that common means offer sufficient information for reasonable thinking, and thereby links “the production of subjectivity” to common sense rather than uncommon means. In so doing, Paine challenges the debt economy’s “exploitation of subjectivity” and rejects the Federalist equivalency between financial accountability and political subjectivity. Paine relies on common sense and common means, and designs a community for common people.

Amanda Porterfield portrays Paine’s writing as hostile towards a prevailing elitist influence on public thought, and shows that Paine worked against organized religious movements in order to challenge Christian orthodoxy. Porterfield argues that Paine employed a dual conception of “reason as the organizing principle of nature … [and]  

\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Ibid} pg. 54.  
\textsuperscript{249} \textit{Ibid}, pg. 53.
reason as an activity of mind… in a political attack on Christianity and biblical revelation... [that] sharpened the division in public opinion over the meaning of democracy.”

Thus, Paine’s embrace of common sense and common means extends to *The Age of Reason*, reveals Paine to be a writer concerned with resisting religious establishments and orthodoxy not only for the sake of religious liberty, but also for the greater concern of challenging hierarchical institutions and establishment interests wherever they might stifle dissent or encourage conformity. It is this larger purpose that so angered Adams and his Federalist allies. In Paine’s own words, “It has been the scheme of the Christian Church, and of all other invented systems of religion, to hold man in ignorance of the Creator, as it is of Governments to hold man in ignorance of his rights.”

Writing from a Paris jail in January 1794, Paine addresses *Age of Reason* “to [his] fellow-citizens of the United States of America.” He writes,

> I put the following work under your protection. It contains my opinions upon religion. You will do me the justice to remember, that I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it. The most formidable weapon

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251 Quoted in Lepore, 69.
against errors of every kind is reason. I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall.\textsuperscript{252}

Paine’s dedication, however, is more than a statement of audience: for Paine, religious belief and political engagement are similar modes of expression. That is, religious toleration \textit{and} political dissent are manifestations of the same foundational democratic value. As “fellow-citizens,” Americans must provide “protection” for Paine’s “opinions upon religion” under penalty of not advancing their views beyond “present opinion.”

Paine uses Enlightenment values to hold religious orthodoxy hostage: an enlightened society will not cower to conventional beliefs, or stifle unconventional beliefs held by its citizens. Again, in Paine’s words: “My own mind is my own church.”\textsuperscript{253}

This statement, however, reveals an intricacy of Paine’s argument often overlooked by historians and literary critics: Paine’s right to dissent from socially acceptable religious views is grounded in his notion of intellectual property as well as the social value of dissent. Paine’s “own mind” is his “own church,” a clever play on the word “own” that suggests that Paine possesses his church the same way that he possesses his mind; Paine treats religious beliefs like private property, not a system of thought used to organize individuals into communities of congregants. For Paine, to think an idea is to own a piece of intellectual property, and, by extension, a person’s reasoned decision to belong to an organized religion is akin to taking ownership of that religious group.

Religious affiliation, then, becomes a means of sorting individual property according to

\textsuperscript{252} Thomas Paine, \textit{The Age of Reason}, 399.

\textsuperscript{253} \textit{Ibid}, 400.
common beliefs, and not a communal association bound together by the shared grace of God.

To John Adams, a Massachusetts Congregationalist turned Unitarian, Paine’s theory of a private, individually owned practice of religious belief must have been an affront to his own experiences with New England communities, which revolved around church life. Specifically, it must have seemed as if Paine’s thoughts on religion worked against much of the public good that came out of Christian-inspired political thought and social movements during the last twenty-five years of the eighteenth century. Indeed, Adams writes in his diary, “The Christian Religion is, above all the Religions that ever prevailed or existed in ancient or modern Times, The Religion of Wisdom, Virtue, Equity and Humanity, let the Blackguard Paine say what he will. It is Resignation to God -- it is Goodness itself to Man.” Adams’s private defense of Christianity is as notable for what it does not include – a spiritual defense of an a priori “Goodness” or god figure – as for what it does include: an affirmation of Christianity’s value to “Humanity.” Adams suggests that is the “Wisdom, Virtue, Equity, and Humanity” of Christianity – specifically, we should infer, Christianity’s ability to transmit these values – not the revelatory truth of Christianity – that warrants his defense. Thus, Paine’s offense was to work against “Goodness itself to Man”: Paine’s offense was utilitarian, not spiritual. Effectively, then, Adams’s complaints against *The Age of Reason* invite a rereading of

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The Age of Reason as a political critique of class relations, and not a faith-based defense of God’s existence.

Paine begins The Age of Reason with an “individual profession of faith” inspired by “several of [his] colleagues, and others of [his] fellow-citizens of France.” Paine does this, ostensibly, to lay the groundwork for his forthcoming refutation of traditional religious doctrine. Paine writes, “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.” Clearly, Paine’s fundamental religious beliefs are not yet at odds with Adams’s, or most other eighteenth century Protestant Americans’: he even believes in a type of earthly goodness, inspired by religion, similar to Adams’s Congregationalist beliefs. “But,” Paine qualifies his profession, “lest it should be supposed that I believe many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them.” Not believing, then, and all the related intellectual activities – doubt, skepticism, critique, etc. – appear to be the hallmark of Paine’s “faith”; this belief system conflicts with the theology of revelation, a characteristic of the religion practiced by Adams and New England Federalists. Paine’s skepticism of powerful figures appears especially clearly in his critique of the story of Jesus. Paine admits that “[Jesus] was a virtuous and an amiable

256 Ibid, 400.
257 Ibid, 400.
man,” but laments that “Jesus Christ wrote no account of himself, of his birth, parentage, or anything else; not a line of what is called the New Testament is of his own writing. The history of him is altogether the work of other people,” who “having brought [Jesus] into the world in a supernatural manner, were obliged to take him out again in the same manner,” which Paine condemns as a “wretched contrivance.”

Paine’s critique of the story of Jesus is startling in the way that it invokes no higher authority – divine or scholarly – to refute the story of Christ’s divinity. Paine, true to his statement “My own mind is my own church,” employs common sense to disprove Christ’s divinity. The power of this critique, however, lies not so much in the substance of its target, but in its ambition: Paine argues against a culturally dominant belief that few would ever have considered even questioning. If Paine could use common sense to reason that Christ was not divine, then surely he could use common sense to reason that a government needed to be overthrown. Indeed, setting aside the “church” element of Paine’s complaint, his broad statement reads thusly: “All national institutions … appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” This statement is only a slight deviation from Paine’s prose, and a logical extension of Paine’s thought. Specifically, Paine’s characterization of “national institutions” as “human inventions” reminds readers that national institutions – such as government – can be modified and abolished through nothing more than human actions. This sentiment functions as a counterstatement to Federalist political texts, such

258 Ibid, 404.
as the Federalist Papers, which debate policy and philosophy at length but ultimately agree on the necessity and moral virtue of a powerful Federal government. Also, Paine’s allegation that “national institutions … monopolize power and profit” restates widely disseminated antifederalist arguments against the Funding Act of 1790. In short, then, Paine’s deceptively straightforward “individual profession of faith” narrates an anti-institutional worldview that extends to government, as well as churches.

Paine credits his “own mind” with facilitating the reasoning capacities and ideas from which he derived his political philosophy, and, by extension, his success as a professional writer. He also credits it with shaping his religious views: Paine writes, “From the time I was capable of conceiving an idea and acting upon it by reflection, I either doubted the truth of the Christian system or thought it to be a strange affair.”

Paine’s doubt in the Christian religion, then, originates in his mind – in his mind’s “reflection” – and not in the teachings of a heretic or an atheist; logical skepticism, not social pressure, leads Paine to question Christianity. As logical skepticism is an active process, something that requires energy to be expended in order to exist, Paine’s critique of revealed religion becomes uniquely his own, the product of his intellectual labor. Understood as such, Paine’s religious beliefs diverge from Christianity in two ways: first, in the disavowal of the truth of the Christian story, and second, in the means by which the believer arrives at his beliefs. Whereas Paine arrived at his religious beliefs by way of

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259 For a more detailed analysis of the Funding Act, see Chapter Two, section on Hamilton’s Report on Public Credit.
articulating a philosophy of common sense, critically reading the story of Christ’s resurrection, and insisting on the primacy of his own ideas over secondary opinions, believers in revealed religion trusted sacred texts to make meaning of the world for them. For Paine, this second divergence from Christianity might have mattered even more than the first: “a priest … takes up the trade … for the sake of gain[ing]” property and power, Paine writes. Priests, in other words, ought not to be trusted to always tell the truth, and gullible congregants might be easily led astray by a priest eager to advance his own interests. Religion, then, allows for both the private construction of a theology and the public construction of a career. Through one’s religious views, a person might reasonably advance both personal and professional interests.

As Paine reiterates the decisions he has made and the positions he has arrived at through the workings of his own mind, he demonstrates that reasoned decision-making allows a person to navigate society in such a way that they might make their own lot in life. That is, making decisions according to one’s own reasoning process – not following orders from a priest and believing in a centuries-old story – is the key to Paine’s brand of radical individualism. Priests, Paine argued, became priests “for the sake of gain,” not for altruistic or divinely inspired reasons. Being a religious leader was no different than

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262 In his response to Paine, Joseph Priestely points out that Paine “uniformly takes it for granted, that every thing which has been ascribed to revelation, even by the most absurd of the Catholics, really belongs to it; and it is sometimes amusing to follow him, in his observations on subjects, concerning which he is wholly ignorant.” One of Priestly’s central contentions is that Paine’s critique of Christianity is primarily a critique of the Catholic Church, and that Paine’s refusal or inability to distinguish between Catholics
being a member of any other profession: people did the work in exchange for payment, and this inspired Paine’s accusations of “perjury” and “moral mischief,” and his stated disbelief in “national institutions of churches,” which deeply offended and angered New England politicians like Adams, whose political base was comprised of New Englanders who met weekly in Congregationalist churches that served as de facto town squares. New England political culture was inextricable from New England religious culture, and Paine’s assault on those values directly insulted Adams and his ilk, who believed that public religion helped control the masses and order society, which they considered critical to the successful functioning of American society. Paine’s assessment that these religious organizations “appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit” undermined Adams’s church-centered society, and cast doubt on the motives of elite New Englanders whose livelihood depended on maintaining a large and dedicated following of the faithful.

Part Three: Beyond Federalist Fears

In *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s condemnation of religion critiqued the emerging class of American elites as well as popular, established religions and religious practices. By pointing to logical fallacies within biblical stories and deriding religious practices

and other Christians undermines his entire argument against revelation. Joseph Priestley, *An Answer to Mr. Paine’s Age of reason* (Northumberland Town, Pennsylvania: J. Johnson, 1794), accessed online at http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0bv7dn14.
carried out by prominent Federalists, Paine challenged establishment orthodoxy across social institutions. To say it another way, Paine expressed skepticism about the class hierarchies embedding themselves across American social institutions and encouraged readers to embrace a similarly skeptical view in their own lives. As Paine’s oeuvre develops from a primarily political focus to a comprehensive refutation of Judeo-Christian orthodoxy, the texts nonetheless retain an anti-authoritarian bent that never ceased to antagonize prominent Federalists and insist on critiquing political and religious institutions to reveal the workings of elite class interests.

In *Common Sense*, Paine proposes a political subjectivity based on common sense and common means. Paine argues that his model of political subjectivity can only be realized through American independence, and thusly demands that the colonies separate from Britain. Indeed, in *Common Sense*, one of Paine’s final arguments for American independence is that, “Should affairs be patched up with Britain … we shall deprive ourselves of the very means of sinking the debt we have or may contract… It is by the sale of [the backcountry lands] that the debt may be sunk, without burthen to any, and the quit-rent reserved thereon, will always lessen, and in time, will wholly support the yearly expense of government.”263 That is, according to Paine, one of the strongest arguments in favor of American independence is the colonies’ need to pay existing war debts and finance a national government; the matters of political independence and the debt economy are problems to be resolved together. For Paine, then, political independence

263 Paine, *Common Sense*, 106.
was always a matter of class, and national identity was necessary only insofar as it distinguished Americans from citizens of other countries.

Class concerns also animated Paine’s critique of revealed religion in *The Age of Reason*, which portrays Christianity as an oppressive belief system that encourages subservience, obedience, and compliance. Moreover, Paine holds that Christian doctrine runs counter to reasonable beliefs and maintains that logical thinking casts doubt on biblical revelation. Paine advocates deism and natural religion in place of revealed religion, and argues that unlike Christianity, which has three gods (the Trinity), “The true Deist has but one Deity and his religion consists in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in His works, and in endeavouring to imitate Him in everything moral, scientific, and mechanical.”

Paine’s deity then, reveals itself in the natural world, and its foremost concern is inspiring man to achieve “moral, scientific, and mechanical” improvement. Paine contrasts his deity with the “pious fraud” of the Christian religion, and juxtaposes the “moral, scientific, and mechanical” advancements of Deism against the “calamitous necessity of going on” of Christianity. Thus, according to Paine, Deism encourages personal improvement and scientific advancements, whereas Christianity encourages perpetual servitude and blind faith. In light of Paine’s critique, it is easy to understand why *The Age of Reason*’s publication accelerated Paine’s exile from the good graces of American public opinion, and why,

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because of Paine’s exile from American public life, literary historians have also overlooked the text as an important publication of the 1790s.

Lepore observes that “Historians, [like two centuries of politicians favoring Paine’s remarks on government], have tried to dismiss The Age of Reason, writing it off as simplistic and suggesting either that Paine wrote it to please his French jailers or that, in prison, he went mad.” This explanation, of course, overlooks the pamphlet’s popularity and explains away the common themes that run through The Age of Reason, The Rights of Man, and Common Sense. It also overlooks one of the pivotal distinctions Paine maintains throughout his oeuvre: the inherently private space of a person’s rational mind, and the inherently public space in which common interests are negotiated and common resources are shared and society comes to life in the form of social interactions between people. From Paine’s perspective, Federalist government and Christian churches both violate this distinction because they commandeer common interests and remake public spaces, and explain these actions by demanding blind faith and intellectual conformity.

Paine counters this mandatory intellectual conformity with a radical rhetoric of individual thought, which Paine understands as synonymous with a thinker’s personal property. Paine advocated for widespread property ownership, and his democratic political rhetoric is rooted in a notion of individual intellectual property at odds with the

266 Ibid, 69.
didactic discourse of governments and churches. In the process of committing this violation of public and private spaces, Paine suggests, Federalist government and Christian churches establish political and religious institutions – physical locations where members meet and practice – and invent words and systems of knowledge – laws, liturgies, etc. – to describe and explain their activities. Their worldly activities animated much of revolutionary America’s social and political life, and their words and knowledge became ubiquitous within the English language. These worldly activities and invented languages reflect the class interests of the institutional founders, and also provide the historical context in which American literature was written. Paine’s critiques of Federalism and Christianity reveal these class interests, and the rhetorical strategies by which Paine critiques governments and churches are intimately related to his formulation of democratic political language.

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Chapter Four: *Towards a Literature of Class: Rethinking Literary Nationalism in Irving and Poe*

In one of the more humorous character descriptions of nineteenth-century fiction, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Washington Irving’s fictitious historian of Dutch settlement in the Hudson River Valley, famously informs the reader that “The great error in Rip [Van Winkle]’s composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor.”\(^{268}\) Despite Rip’s “aversion to all kinds of profitable labor,” he was hardly lazy; indeed, “Rip was ready to attend to any body’s business but his own; but as to doing family duty, and keeping his farm in order, he found it impossible.”\(^{269}\) Rip, then, was a capable worker – “He would carry a fowling-piece on his shoulder for hours together, trudging through woods and swamps, and up hill and down dale, to shoot a few squirrels or wild pigeons” – and willing to work when the spirit moved him – “He would never refuse to assist a neighbor even in the roughest toil” – but resolutely opposed “profitable labor” because, “he declared … every thing about [his farm] went wrong, and would go wrong, in spite of him.”\(^{270}\) Rip, then, resigned himself to his wife’s perpetual “dining in his ears about his idleness, and carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family,”\(^{271}\) and watched “his patrimonial estate [dwindle] away under his management, acre by acre, until there


\(^{269}\) *Ibid*, 35.

\(^{270}\) *Ibid*, 35.

\(^{271}\) *Ibid*, 36.
was little more left than a mere patch of Indian corn and potatoes … the worst conditioned farm in the neighborhood,“\textsuperscript{272} but maintained that his circumstances could not have been otherwise because his labor would not have been profitable. Rip, then, protested the economic demands of his time and place: he recognized the futility of his labor – “the rain always made a point of setting in just as he had some out-door work to do,”\textsuperscript{273} Knickerbocker recalls – and subsequently accepted the wrath of “his termagant wife.”\textsuperscript{274} In terms of class, Rip identified neither as a laborer, who exchanges his labor for wages, nor as an owner, who exploits labor for profit. That is, Rip refused to participate in an exploitative economy, and contented himself with wasting away most of his adult life, “eat[ing] white bread or brown, whichever can be got with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound.”\textsuperscript{275} In sum, Rip saw more risk than reward in the exchange of labor for commodities, and opted to sleep for twenty years rather than work for a single day.

My reading of “Rip Van Winkle” departs from scholarship on the story in that, I argue, Rip’s engagement with the village economy – characterized here by Rip’s attitude towards profitable labor – offers insight into the differences between Rip’s pre-war and post-war village that have been otherwise attributed to the political and cultural changes brought about by the American Revolution. My reading suggests that class formation played a demonstrable role in the remaking of Rip’s village, and relocates the force of

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid, 37.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid, 36.
community building from the political and historical dimensions of Irving’s story to the story’s portrayal of early American economies. As such, my reading reveals the roles of class and economy in shaping early American literary nationalism. The primary insight to be gained from this reading is that early American literary nationalism responded to economic anxiety as much as cultural and historical anxieties, and that, consequentially, the more developed expressions of literary nationalism that emerged during the era of Manifest Destiny appropriate a narrative of class formation, as well as political nationalism. Thus, the literary works that shaped antebellum culture contain narratives of upward mobility as well as narratives of nation building.

In an article on Irving’s attitude towards financial instability in early America, Andrew Kopec proposes an allegorical reading of “Rip Van Winkle”: Kopec asserts that “Rip seems to represent what we might think of as pure speculation… [and] Dame Van Winkle … represents, to use Irving’s term, stern economic ‘discipline.’” That is, Rip and Dame Van Winkle allegorize contradictory forms of labor: Rip represents exchange value, which varies according to the demand for his labor, while Dame represents use

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276 Andrew Kopec, “Irving, Ruin, and Risk,” *Early American Literature* 48.3 (2013): 727. Kopec’s article is concerned primarily with Irving’s attitude towards financial instability in early America, not a specific reading of “Rip Van Winkle.” Within this context, however, Kopec helpfully classifies “Rip Van Winkle” as “an allegory of authorial labor in early America… [that] acknowledges the limits of what writing fiction can accomplish for a professional writer in a commercial society governed by an ideology of achieved identity” (727-729).
value, which varies according to her material needs. Kopec arrives at his allegorical reading of Rip and Dame Van Winkle by way of Howard Horwitz’s argument (as summarized by Kopec) that “Rip exhibits an anti-Lockean sense of labor that yields not personal but communal property… which cannot be legitimized in the sketch’s late colonial and early American setting until it serves the civic function of consolidating national identity.” That is, Rip resists his village’s system of labor and property exchange because it relies on individual – rather than communal – property rights, and demonstrates “an affinity for labor that profits the community,” rather than his family. However, Rip’s colonial neighbors cannot appreciate this type of work because they have no civic identity to which it can contribute. Kopec uses his reading to better understand the relationship between Irving’s entrance to the unstable early American literary marketplace and “the ways in which literary history … grappled with (not simply represented) economic phenomena like commercial risk and ambition, failure and success,” and concludes that Irving’s career raises questions about “why a professional writer writes” in early America. Thus, for Kopec, what’s at stake in “Rip Van Winkle” is a better understanding of the relationship between the early American literary marketplace and the market economy’s role in shaping national literary culture. However,

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278 Andrew Kopec, “Irving, Ruin, and Risk,” 728.
279 Ibid, 728.
280 Ibid, 729.
281 Ibid, 729.
Kopec focuses on Irving’s personal financial state and early-life business engagement, rather than the competing sketches of economy in “Rip Van Winkle.” This analysis offers insights to literary history and the historical development of literary nationalism, but does not reimagine the stakes of literary nationalism.

Similarly, Horwitz reads “Rip Van Winkle” as evidence that “Irving worried … that the legendary transmission of tales and thus of cultural memory was fragile in the new republic.” For Horwitz, “The narrative frame of ‘Rip Van Winkle’ suggests Irving’s approach to the problem of cultural transmission”: a series of attestations, beginning with Crayon’s note from Knickerbocker, who claims to have “heard the tale from others,” including Rip, which collectively ensures that the story is “reread and retold … [and] continually circulated.” Horwitz, then, identifies the conflict between individual and collective labor in “Rip Van Winkle,” but classifies this conflict as a symptom of an “inefficient and contestatory” pre-war village economy. Rip’s labor is out of place because of a faltering colonial economy. Paradoxically, Horwitz claims, the pre-war village economy encourages social cohesion as compensation for economic stagnation, and when economic conditions improve following the war, social cohesion – represented in the character of Dame Van Winkle – vanishes, and literary nationalism – represented in Rip’s retellings of his story – takes its place.

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283 *Ibid*, 44.
reading, social cohesion is incompatible with literary nationalism: thus, when Rip returns to the village after his nap, he discovers “the disputatiousness of the townsfolk, as they encounter unfamiliar tensions and conflicts with others in the absence of common and well-internalized conventions for interaction.” Rip, however, resolves this tension when “[his] identity is reconstituted as storyteller and town patriarch… [and] his fantastical tale, now internalized by the townsfolk, reconstitutes the villagers, who now possess through the figure of Rip a collective memory, linking them to a past which they can regard as less disputatious than the present.” For Horwitz, as for Kopec, Rip’s story – specifically, the integration of Rip’s story into the village’s collective memory – is responsible for building a community out of the post-war, “disputatious” villagers. This reading fits with the extensive literary apparatuses that frame the tale of “Rip Van Winkle,” but, again, remains grounded in an understanding of literary nationalism that imagines national community-building as a literary project of cultural memory making. As such, this reading contributes to a narrative of the Andersonian imagined community nation-building, and does not privilege a model of nation-building in which economic actors and economic agents bear primary responsibility for shaping national identity.

Extending Kopec’s reading of Rip and Dame Van Winkle as allegories of exchange value and use value, respectively, I argue that Irving’s short story helps us to better understand the relationship between class and national literary history. Specifically, I demonstrate that the communal association in “Rip Van Winkle,” which Horwitz

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286 Ibid, 38.
287 Ibid, 38.
describes as “national memory” and Kopec describes as “an ideology of achieved identity,” also can be read as social class; that is, in “Rip Van Winkle,”
Knickerbocker/Crayon/Irving portray a village in which the formation of class interests governs the daily lives of its inhabitants. In making this argument, I revise Horwitz’s assertions that “The presence of [Dame Van Winkle], rendered conspicuous and thereby deviant, salvages the community’s idealized sense of itself,” and that “the figure of Rip permits the villagers to engage in an ongoing elision of national memory in order to commemorate that memory.” That is, the pre-war village was economically volatile but socially stable, and the post-war village is economically stable but socially volatile; the Revolution stabilized the economy, and destabilized the society. Rather, I suggest, the social and economic spheres of Rip’s village are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually constitutive, and national literary culture – allegorized as Rip’s oral history – is actually a form of communal labor that fosters social cohesion through shared property.

The problem, for Rip, is that his pre-war village cannot value his labor because, as a colonial village, it has no unifying communal identity to which Rip can contribute; thus,

288 Ibid, 37.
290 Howard Horwitz, “Rip Van Winkle,” 40.
291 Ibid, 40. Horwitz also asserts, “The figure of Rip, reiterating his tale of liberation into leisure, permits the villagers to reimagine the pre-war economy as without colonial restrictions or competitive strains, and thereby to reimagine the new nation’s evolved commercial economy as mutual cooperation” (40). My reading of class formation in “Rip Van Winkle” derives largely from this point. However, Horwitz moves on from the villagers “[reimagining] the new nation’s evolved commercial economy as mutual cooperation” (40) to make a point about the literary transmission of national memory, whereas I consider this insight with respect to the formation of social class.
Dame Van Winkle badgers Rip about his rambling conversations at the village inn, and the work he does for his friends about town is not reciprocated. Rip labors towards an economy based on communal property rights, but other villagers do not. This changes after his nap, when Rip “preferred making friends among the rising generation, with whom he soon grew into favor” by “[taking] his place once more on the bench at the inn door, and [being] reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times ‘before the war.’”\(^{292}\) In Rip’s new position, his post-Revolution capacity as village patriarch, Rip labors as an oral historian who educates the village’s first generation national subjects about their collective past. Moreover, Rip’s idle, inconsequential banter at the village inn transforms into a “story [told] to every stranger that arrived at Mr Doolittle’s hotel”\(^{293}\): Rip changes from Nicholas Vedder’s ideological vassal into a sovereign producer and transmitter of his own thoughts and memories. Thus, in the post-Revolution society, in which the villagers are national citizens drawn together under the image of George Washington and through the discourse of politics, Rip discovers an economic system that both identifies his oral history as collective labor and assigns value to his product, a form of communal property. As such, Rip’s “disputatious” village (to use Horwitz’s adjective) achieves social stability not in a shared historical narrative or communal memory, but in communal property ownership.

When Rip awakens from his twenty-year nap, “He look[s] round for his gun, but in place of the clean well-oiled fowling-piece, he [finds] an old firelock lying by him, the

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\(^{293}\) Ibid, 47.
barrel encrusted with rust, the lock falling off, and the stock worm-eaten.”

Immediately after waking, then, Rip observes the decay of his private property. Likewise, Rip “[find] the way to his own house … [and finds] the house gone to decay—the roof fallen in, the windows shattered, and the doors off the hinges.”

Again, then, Rip observes the dilapidation of his private property. His house and gun, two of his most practical and useful possessions, have become useless; and, consequently, valueless, both to Rip as a shooter and inhabitant and a potential buyer as commodities. Moreover, Rip’s dog, Wolf, his closest friend, fails to recognize him, effectively depriving Rip of all of his material and interpersonal connections that existed before his nap. Rip, then, falls asleep as the possessor of private property and companion of Wolf, and awakens as an indigent and stranger. This transformation, however is short-lived: Rip soon finds recognition in the crowd of villagers that gathers to gawk at the unfamiliar old man with the foot-long beard, and even manages to discover his daughter and grandson, thereby integrating himself into their household. In short, Rip finds himself deprived of his private dwelling, possession, and relationship, and instead finds himself included in a multigenerational home and public community of political debaters. Rip, then, finds that the Revolution has transformed property rights from private to public, and relationships from personal to communal. The death of Dame Van Winkle represents all of these transformations, as she was Rip’s wife – his most intimate relationship – and reminded him to maintain his farm and household – the voice of private property.

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294 Ibid, 41.
295 Ibid, 42.
Aside from finding his way around the unfamiliar village, Rip’s greatest difficulty upon returning from his nap is in understanding the changed political status of his village. In fact, the first question Rip faces upon returning to the village has nothing to do with his long beard or strange attire: rather, “the tavern politicians … inquired ‘on which side he voted?’” and “‘whether he was Federal or Democrat?’” The questions bewilder Rip, who responds, “‘I am a poor quiet man, a native of the place, and a loyal subject of the king, God bless him!’” Rip’s puzzling response prompts the villagers to inquire further about his purpose for visiting the town, and it is only upon discovering an old woman who recognizes Rip that he is allowed into the community; it is quite a bit longer, however, until Rip is fully integrated into the community. “It was some time before he could get into the regular track of gossip, or could be made to comprehend the strange events that had taken place during his torpor” Knickerbocker writes. “How that there had been a revolutionary war—that the country had thrown off the yoke of old England—and that, instead of being a subject of his Majesty George the Third, he was now a free citizen of the Unites States.” It seems as if Rip must learn to speak the language of American politics in order to make sense of the unfamiliar village society into which he has been thrust. Specifically, it seems that Rip must learn to distinguish between the Federalists – the party of Washington and Hamilton, which favored a strong central government – and the Democrats – the party of Jefferson, which favored a decentralized

296 Ibid, 43-44.
297 Ibid, 44.
298 Ibid, 47.
299 Ibid, 47.
approach to governing the republic. Rip seems faced with competing models of national government, and, by implication, competing models of social organization. However, Rip makes no attempt to participate in the discourse of politics that so befuddle him. Rather, he appreciates that “he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle.” Although Rip eventually comes to accept American independence and the country’s new political discourse, “Rip, in fact, was no politician,” Knickerbocker reveals. “The changes of states and empires made but little impression on him” because “there was [only] one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was—petticoat government.” Rip, then, dismisses American independence as an inconsequential historical oddity, and remains a resolutely apolitical creature, even in his new, highly politicized environment, with one telling exception: his continued opposition to “petticoat government.”

Described as a “termagant” housewife, Dame Van Winkle plays the role of Rip’s antagonist: Rip escapes not merely from his wife’s badgering and nagging, but from “the ever-during and all-besetting terrors of” her tongue, and even from the “tyranny” of her government. Simultaneously, Rip finds himself relieved of his laborious obligations to maintain his family and estate; Rip is freed from the work required to maintain the value

302 *Ibid*, 47.
304 *Ibid*, 47.
of his private property. Read in this context, Dame Van Winkle is more than a misogynist caricature of a woman: she is an allegory of a type of oppressive working conditions, and the vitriol she directs at Rip is more than exaggerated bickering: it is the allegorized discourse of private property rights. Read as “petticoat government,” Dame Van Winkle voices not only domestic discord, but also the political rendering of the material demands of private property. In fact, Dame Van Winkle dies because “she [breaks] a blood-vessel in a fit of passion at a New-England pedler [sic.]”; she suffers a stroke because she is overly excited during an argument with a merchant, presumably over the price of a good. Thus, after his wife’s death, when Rip finds an audience for his oral history – the communal property of his collective labor – he becomes the dominant economic allegory of the story, and the village operates according to a collectivist – rather than individualist – notion of property rights. This change in the village’s understanding of property rights, I argue, is what enables Rip to integrate himself to the village community; in other words, Dame Van Winkle’s death – the allegorized death of private property rights – is precisely what allows Rip to provide the oral history that fills the village’s need for collective memory, which, I argue, is itself an allegory for communal property.

Even after Rip integrates himself into the post-war village and settles on a stable version of his story, “Some [villagers] always pretended to doubt the reality of it, and insisted that Rip had been out of his head, and that this was one point on which he always remained flighty. The old Dutch inhabitants, however, almost universally gave it full

305 Ibid, 46.
The Americans, then, are suspicious of Rip’s product; Diedrich Knickerbocker, however subscribes to the beliefs of the area’s longer-term residents, in part, he informs, because “The Kaatsberg, or Catskill Mountains, have always been a region full of fable,” and “The Indians considered them the abode of spirits… The story, therefore,” Knickerbocker writes, “is beyond the possibility of doubt.” The disagreement between the Americans and the Dutch regarding the truth of Rip’s story suggests that the two populations ascribe to different cultural heritages. Knickerbocker integrates these heritages by telling Rip’s story, and in so doing points to another discrepancy between the post-war villagers – the Americans – and their Dutch and Native American forbearers: different notions of community identity. The suspicious Americans are explicitly politicized U.S. citizens: they are governed by the U.S. Constitution, and engaged in debates over political policies and actively voting for both the Federalist and Democratic parties. In contrast to the American political model of community, the Dutch inhabitants derive their perspective on Rip’s story from a culture that predates the United States, and even the British colony of New York. The Dutch community identity is based on heritage: it is expressly apolitical, whereas the American community identity is based on political affiliation. Because of the twenty-year duration of his nap, Rip cannot include the revolutionary war in his oral histories: indeed, Knickerbocker writes, Rip becomes “a chronicle of old times ‘before the war.’” Exposed to Rip’s story, Rip’s American

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306 Ibid, 47.
308 Ibid, 47.
audience experiences a tension between Rip’s history – a heritage not based in the American Revolution or the resulting political affiliations – and their own, politicized community, in which political affiliation informs social interactions. To make sense of this tension, I turn to historian Charles Beard’s *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* in order to consider Rip’s early national community as an economic association of classes, rather than a political federation of states.

Beard rejects “the juristic theory of the origin and nature of the Constitution,” which holds that “The Constitution proceeds from the whole people; the people are the original source of all political authority exercised under it; it is founded on broad general principles of liberty and government entertained, for some reason, by the whole people and having no reference to the interest or advantage of any particular group or class.”

Indeed, Beard argues, “In the juristic view, the Constitution is not only the work of the whole people, but it also bears in it no traces of the party conflict from which it emerged.” Thus, the juristic theory presents Constitutional law as “[separate] from the social and economic fabric by which it is, in part, conditioned and which, in turn, it helps to condition,” which is problematic because “most of the law … is concerned with the property relations of men, which reduced to their simple terms mean the processes by which the ownership of concrete forms of property is determined or passes from one

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That is, the juristic theory of the Constitution – the theory established by Chief Justice Marshall and maintained throughout most American jurisprudence – conceives of American citizens as political subjects – representations – rather than human beings who comprise “the social and economic fabric” of the material world they inhabit; Americans’ foundational understanding of political affiliation elides their economic attachment to the material world. Politically imagined American communities do not account for the obvious and powerful class interests that develop from property relations between them, and politically engaged communities often fail to account for the property relations that govern their daily lives, and find themselves deprived of material necessities in spite of their political activities.

In Rip’s post-war village, the villagers are obsessed with political affiliation: when Rip declares himself “a loyal subject of the king,” he inspires “a general shout from the by-standers—‘A tory! a tory! a spy! a refugee! hustle him! away with him!’” and “It [is] with great difficulty [emphasis mine] that the self-important man in the cocked hat restore[s] order.” It eventually comes to light that Rip had slept through the American Revolution and had been, therefore, ignorant of American independence when he had declared his loyalty to the king, but the villagers never become angry with Rip for failing to learn about the war in the same way that they become angry with Rip for identifying as a British subject. This suggests that the villagers are concerned with political affiliation, not American independence: the “lean, bilious-looking fellow, with his pockets full of

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311 Ibid, 12.
hand-bills, [is] haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens—elections—members of congress—liberty—Bunker’s Hill—heroes of seventy-six,” only one of which—“Bunker’s Hill”—refers directly to the American Revolution. They ask him questions about the election, not opinions about Washington. The post-war villagers—unlike Dame Van Winkle—are never in a position to ask Rip about the condition of his estate or his plans to improve his farm: as politicized subjects, they eschew discussions of property relations, and when Rip becomes the village historian—freely providing communal property through collective labor—he fills a public need not only for cultural history, but also for a performance of property rights. Rip freely relates his story for all to hear, and serves as a model by which other villagers can learn to share their labor and collectively own a story. As politicized citizens, the villagers concern themselves with politics rather than economics, Rip’s stories rather than the maintenance of private property, and a common origin story rather than critical evaluation of current living conditions; Rip’s farm has fallen to complete disrepair, and “his former cronies” are “all rather worse for the wear and tear of time.” Rip’s village seems harmonious as a national community freed from the “tyranny” of Dame Van Winkle, but the collective property of Rip’s story and “snug, well-furnished house” of Rip’s daughter belie a state of decay that has taken over the pre-war village; as Beard contends, national politics obfuscates economic analysis.

313 Ibid, 43.  
314 Ibid, 47.  
315 Ibid, 47.
Unlike Irving, who, Kopec shows, was personally invested in producing profitable literature, 316 and Crayon and Knickerbocker, who attest several times to the authenticity of Rip’s story, 317 Rip is an orator, not a writer. As an orator – even after Rip finally finds a productive part to play in his village – he continues to demonstrate “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor,” or, at least, the kind of labor that produces a profit for only one person. 318 Rip’s notion of property digresses from the dominant, American understanding of private property rights – visible in my account as both Irving’s real-life work and Crayon and Knickerbocker’s fictional narration and attestation – and casts its lot with the Dutch understanding of communal property rights. In light of my account, reading Rip’s story as an allegory for American national literary history reveals a narrative driven by competing notions of property ownership, not a unifying political identity. Tellingly, Rip’s stories “of the old times ‘before the war’” 319 are nothing more than stories; they are true within the universe of “Rip Van Winkle,” but the events are certified by the character Peter Vanderdonk, who “assured the [villagers] that it was a fact, handed down from his ancestor the historian, that the Kaatskill mountains had always been haunted by strange beings.” 320 Rip’s stories acquire their historicity from a supernatural power, “strange beings” that “haunt … ‘the Kaatskill mountains’; the common origin story that Rip freely shares rather than sells, and, by

316 Andrew Kopec, “Irving, Ruin, and Risk,” 731.
318 Ibid, 35.
319 Ibid, 47.
320 Ibid, 46.
implication, the circulation of his story is not so much the invention of a national history as it is the collectivist production of a communal product of uncertain reliability. Diedrich Knickerbocker anticipates this critique of the story’s authenticity, and attests that he “talked with Rip Van Winkle myself, who, when I last saw him, was a very venerable old man, and so perfectly rational and consistent on every other point, that I think no conscientious person could refuse to take this into the bargain.”

Knickerbocker, Irving’s fictional historian, offers his professional assessment of Rip’s reliability as evidence of the tale’s authenticity; but Geoffrey Crayon, Irving’s fictional narrator, explains Knickerbocker’s logic with “notes from a memorandum-book of Mr Knickerbocker” that record a Native American story similar to Rip’s. This suggests that Knickerbocker adapted “the Indian traditions” to fit the Dutch settlement, and Americanized the story as a way to offer an account of a small village around the time of the American Revolution. Irving’s fictional narrator relays the account of a fictional historian who relays a supernatural account of the formation of a national community; a work of short fiction recounts an unreliable historical narrative, a sort of double negation that relies on a reader’s certainty of factual history. In this sense, Irving’s literary nationalism perpetuates an uncritical perspective on the founding moment, and writes out the Revolutionary War and Constitutional Convention from the national history. Thus, we can reconsider critical accounts of American literary nationalism by

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322 Ibid, 48-49.
323 Ibid, 49.
rereading nationality as an analytical category that depends on economics, as much as politics. Recovering the work of Charles Beard is integral to this project, as Beard’s philosophy of economic determinism challenges the more purely political understandings of American citizenship that have come to dominate literary studies. In turn, this shift in critical perspective exposes the contested definition of class throughout early American literature.

Against Irving’s literary obfuscation of class formation via literary nationalism, Edgar Allan Poe hints at an element of danger within both the emerging national literature and its elision of economic stratification in Jacksonian America. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe considers the decay of family and estate in late-Jacksonian America, and offers a skeptical account of literary nationalism. One of the remarkable plot elements of “The Fall of the House of Usher” is the tremendous instability of the story. All three human characters are mentally, emotionally, and physically unstable, like American life in the age of Jackson. Lara Cohen reminds us that although “The Jacksonian era has become known as the market revolution … this term’s concision belies the actual development of capitalism in the United States, which was contentious, messy, and fraught with doubt… At any given moment, Americans literally did not know what their money was worth.” Economic class at this point is a doubly dangerous concept: “Expanding transportation networks and communication networks, western land speculation, and laissez-faire ideology encouraged the banks to issue currency and extend

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credit in ever growing quantities,” effectively creating a “puffed” class of nouveau riche, but that emerging class was liable to go broke at any given moment.  

This instability in person and place is reflected in the instability of the literal and personified House of Usher, which Poe’s narrator describes as “a mansion of gloom” that collapses immediately after one of its human counterparts, Madeline Usher, kills her brother, Roderick, who had recently buried her alive. Scholars have tended to emphasize the “gothic morbidity” of the House of Usher, but I read the story as one of instability and uncertainty regarding class formation and literary nationalism.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the narrator’s first observation upon seeing the Usher mansion is “of an excessive antiquity.” Despite “The discoloration of ages,” No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the

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325 Ibid, 36.
327 Ibid, 28-29.
328 For an especially revealing reading along these lines, see Peter Coviello, “Poe in Love: Pedophilia, Morbidity, and the Logic of Slavery,” ELH 70:3 (Fall 2003), 875-901.
breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability.330

The Usher mansion, a timeless, antique symbol of wealth, has become a relic of “excessive antiquity,” but remains fully intact in spite of “the crumbling condition of the individual stones.” Like the economic structure of Jacksonian America, the overall structure of the Usher Mansion remains intact, regardless of the crumbling wealth that occupies different classes at any given moment. This observation also fits Sir Roderick, the Usher patriarch, whose “voice,” the narrator recalls, “varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation… which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.”331 As the Usher mansion continues to function despite its crumbling pieces – personified as the inbred, mad Roderick – so Roderick continues to play the part of a manorial lord despite his crumbling mind, which he seeks to explain by reading books concerned “with this character of phantasm” that he feels overpowering him.332 These books, the narrator recalls, “for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid… We pored together over such works as the Vervet et Chartreuse of Gresset, the Belphegor

330 Ibid, 16.
331 Ibid, 18.
332 Ibid, 23.
of Machiavelli… over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours.” Finally, after obsessing over these books, Usher decides to bury Madeline alive, having fully succumbed to his madness.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” then, it is reading that pushes Roderick to entomb Madeline. More precisely, it is Usher’s obsessive reading of Gresset, a French poet, and Machiavelli, an Italian political theorist, and, finally, it is the narrator’s reading of Poe’s own short story, the “Mad Trist,” that induces Madeline to leave her tomb and kill Roderick. The European literary tradition, in Poe’s story, has driven the American reader to madness, and the artificially constructed American literary tradition induces actual murder. This portrayal of the European and American literary traditions exemplifies what Cohen describes as Poe’s “sustained attack on the stagecraft of print culture,” which she argues Poe makes in “attempts to expose the flimsy foundations of literary prestige.”

Although Cohen is not discussing “The Fall of the House of Usher” in this passage, her metaphoric “flimsy foundations of literary prestige” lends itself well as a descriptor for the Usher mansion, which has “vacant eye-like windows… [and] a few white trunks of dead decayed trees.” The Usher mansion, a symbol of aristocracy and European society, still functions as a whole, but is rife with “crumbling… individual

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333 Ibid, 23.
334 Ibid, 23.
335 Ibid, 27.
336 Lara Cohen, Fabrication of American Literature, 56.
stones," and is out of place in America. Reading in this environment produces toxic and deadly reactions, which reflects what Cohen calls “The literati’s growing fears about the unsoundness of American literature, the measures they devised to keep the print public sphere aloft, and the unpredictable outcomes of those measures.” Poe portrays a decrepit literary culture founded on artificial and illicit means – the narrator tells us “that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain” – that fantastically collapses on itself.

Poe’s narrator flees the Usher mansion at the story’s conclusion, but turns his head back to see “the full, setting, and blood-red moon which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure … extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base.” The Usher mansion has gone the way of Rip Van Winkle’s untended farm, only to a greater extreme; subject to the trauma of Madeline’s murder, the house can no longer support itself. Poe’s edifice of literary nationalism collapses under the weight of the dead European literary tradition and the poor American imitations that are devoid of worthwhile content. Whereas Rip’s village embraced his American stories as a means to embrace their nationality while avoiding the violence of

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338 Ibid, 16.
341 Ibid, 28.
the Revolution, Poe’s narrator flees from an American story that induced murder and was unable to sustain an estate.

Considering “The Fall of the House of Usher” alongside “Rip Van Winkle” reveals competing portrayals of American literary nationalism. Irving’s story doubly perpetuates the myth of a national literature: once through Rip’s return as village historian, and again as an obviously fictional story certified as fact by a fictional narrator. In Irving’s fabricated American literature, political nationalism elides the continued decay of personal property. Poe’s story confronts the myth of a national literature through the reading of “The Trist” and the collapse of the Usher mansion, which also portrays the literal destruction of private property associated with paper money in Jacksonian America and what Cohen calls the “puffing” of low-quality American literature.\(^\text{342}\) Poe, then, exposes the fraudulent bases of cultural and economic prosperity in Jacksonian America, while Irving anticipates a literary nationalist movement that might desire precisely the type of work Poe condemns. The differences between these two portrayals speak to the radically different states of professional authorship in America 1819 and 1839.