

3.1 | Early American Literature

3.1.1 | Overview

John Smith's *A Map of Virginia* (1612), one of the earliest eyewitness accounts of America in the English language, begins:

VIRGINIA is a Country in America that lyeth betwene the degrees of 34 and 44 of the north latitude. The bounds thereof on the East side are the great Ocean. On the South lyeth Florida: on the North nova Francia. As for the West thereof, the limits are unknowne. (sect. 1)

This brief opening is characteristic of the **colonial worldview** in a number of ways. First, there is the foundational act of naming the country in print, a mental appropriation fittingly complemented by the physical measurement of space, a drawing of boundaries and borders. Next, there is the striking contrast between enclosure (to the East, South, and North) and the limitless expanse to the West: a space of copious opportunities that will determine American self-descriptions for centuries to come. Finally, and perhaps most importantly at the time, there is the inevitable framework of European power struggles: boxed in between French and Spanish holdings, Virginia beckons in Smith's tract as a promise yet to be fulfilled, an English dream-escape of pressing necessity but uncertain reality.

Competition over territories and resources fostered competing visions of America. Early European descriptions of the new continent were shaped as much by the wonder of the unexpected as by the need to legitimize their own existence. **Writing and settlement** were so closely interwoven that 'American literature' in its original form often looks like a double conjuring act: making itself appear self-evident while giving reality to a cultural realm improbably close to and yet marvelously removed from Europe. In important ways, it has remained so ever since: to read American literature means to read a literature which is different from others, not because of some unmistakable national character or exceptional heritage and destiny, but because of its inescapable investment in the **problematical term American**. Recursive to a degree so obvious it is easy to overlook, American literature has always been concerned with the conditions of its own possibility: with the power of words and narratives to create what they describe. How unlikely is it that the expansive name *America* came to denote, in the ordinary speech of most

people in the world today, the United States? American Studies is about this unlikelihood; the discipline's defining concern is with the culture-making force of American self-descriptions.

It is sometimes said that America already existed in the European imagination before it was discovered. And true, literature has always fantasized about new worlds. The Western story repertoire abounds with model places of spiritual regeneration and perfect government. Christopher Columbus, too, went on his sea voyage with interpretive preconceptions in tow that were derived from his **readings**, although not of utopian philosophy or tales of earthly paradise but of the Bible and Marco Polo. It bears repeating that the latter's accounts of China shaped Columbus's project in more than rhetorical terms. Asia, physically so much more concrete than the myth of Atlantis or Plato's ideal Republic, provided a rationale and a destination for Europe's first American voyages. The goal was to find a Western passage to India; the aim, by going west, was to arrive in the Far East. In order to comprehend the astonishment produced by Columbus's inadvertent discovery in 1492, it is useful to remember that the Western hemisphere entered the European mind as an unexpected space. It may have already been filled with images and narratives of territorial self-transcendence, but once its dimensions became clear, they were staggering: a **New World** indeed. This surprise still reverberates 115 years later in

Timeline: The Making of 'America'

1492	Columbus lands in America
1607	Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement, is founded
1620	The Pilgrim Fathers found Plymouth Plantation in New England
1630	Massachusetts Bay Colony
1692	Salem witch trials
1773	Boston Tea Party
1775–1783	American War of Independence
1776	Declaration of Independence
1791	Bill of Rights ratified (the first ten amendments to the U.S. constitution)
1803	Louisiana Purchase: the U.S. acquires most of the American Midwest
1812	War of 1812 between the U.S. and Great Britain
1823	The Monroe Doctrine asserts U.S. influence over the Americas

Smith's statement about the American West: "the limits thereof are unknown." After the empirical precision of the preceding sentences, this terse remark opens up bright vistas of possibility. No longer a realm of geographical transition, the West has become a massive challenge to the European imagination.

3.1.2 | Labor and Faith: English Writing, English Settlement (1584–1730)

England was a latecomer to the colonial race. Largely a Reformed nation—although Reformation theology took some idiosyncratic turns off the continent—it followed a course of colonization markedly different from Spain, Portugal, and France. In hindsight, it is hard to argue with the success of the English model, if success can be measured by the longevity of settlements, the sustained cultivation of resources, and long-term economic wealth. In intellectual terms, England brought two conflicting traditions to the New World: radical **Protestantism** and **Baconian empiricism**. In conjunction with the latter, early English authors tended to imagine the Western hemisphere not only as a natural paradise for exploitation or seclusion but as an explicitly political testing ground: a place to remake society. Appropriately, the early modern genre of *utopia* was launched by an English author, with Thomas More's Renaissance classic from 1516 (in Latin, translated into English in 1551; cf. section I.2.2.2). Francis Bacon followed suit in 1627 with *The New Atlantis*.

Colonization. But actual colonization started out differently. The first attempt at English settlement was initiated and overseen by **Sir Walter Raleigh**. It failed miserably. In 1584, Raleigh founded a colony on Roanoke Island, off the coast of today's North Carolina. Six years later, in Raleigh's absence, the settlement had mysteriously disappeared. All of the colonists were gone; only a signpost with the word "CROATOAN" remained. Unperturbed by the tragedy of the 'lost colony,' Raleigh turned his attention to South America, publishing *The Discovery of Guiana* in 1595, a tract promoting large-scale, Spanish-style settlements on the Orinoco river. Raleigh's book stands as one of the strongest expressions of the road not taken by English colonialism. It described Guiana as a land where riches could be acquired easily: "every stone that we stouped to take up, promised either

golde or silver by his complexion" (pt. 4). *The Discovery of Guiana* urged Queen Elizabeth I to get a foothold in South America, because if she did not, Spain would enlarge its transatlantic holdings and become a colonial superpower. Not mincing his words, Raleigh recommended that a virgin land be raped:

Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, [...] the graves have not bene opened for golde, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puld downe out of their temples. It hath never bene entered by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any Christian Prince. (pt. 5)

A list of negatives, but its reasoning was unmistakably **imperialistic**: a rhetoric of national competition for resources and glory. In the end, England chose a different path to empire. Partly because of the costly failure of Roanoke, parliament and the crown decided to sidestep established models of settlement that relied either on private initiative or large-scale government commitment (as in the Spanish case). In contrast to these policies, England would concentrate on small bases which were to be financed by joint-stock companies and granted royal charters. Two companies were founded in this way: the Virginia Company of Plymouth (no relation to the later Puritan settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts) and the Virginia Company of London, which in 1607 established the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown.

Writing in the Jamestown Settlement. In terms of its literary representation, Jamestown is inseparably linked with Captain **John Smith**, British America's first great prose stylist. Smith's description of the Powhatan Indians in *A True Relation of Virginia* (1608), though inflected by promotional purposes and Christian prejudices, counts among the earliest proto-ethnographic texts in American literature, evincing an empiricist ethos of observation and experiential knowledge. Even though Smith stayed in Jamestown for only two years, he shaped English colonial discourse in profound and lasting ways. Apart from being the author of some of the earliest English-language descriptions of the New World, Smith also became one of America's first self-made literary characters, mainly through his relationship with Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas, which he increasingly dramatized in later writings.

Like Raleigh, Smith believed that England required colonies to keep up with other European

Roanoke, the 'lost colony'

powers. Moreover, he feared that English society, with its economic imbalances between the lower and the upper classes, was heading toward a crisis. He was particularly troubled by the dependency of farmers on their landlords, but also by the growing number of young people who lived off their inheritances. The New World provided a solution to these problems; it made unprofitable labor profitable and counteracted rising unemployment, offering a purpose to aimless youngsters in the bargain. The underlying idea was as simple as it was convincing: **send England's surplus people overseas** to make them become productive elsewhere. For centuries, this formula, so different from the Spanish model, encapsulated the socio-economic rationale behind English (and later British) settlement efforts. In bettering their own condition, colonists were supposed to open up new resources for the home-country. And vice versa: by benefiting the market at home, they would improve themselves. Thus, the relationship between England and its colonies was considered to be a mutually beneficial and contractual one (during the American Revolution, this model would become the source of many a dramatic misunderstanding between parliament and the Anglo-American colonists).

Little wonder that Smith rejected "the shimmering mirage of gold [...] through which the sixteenth century saw the New World" (Gunn 65). Instead of Raleigh's emphasis on easy wealth, Smith stressed the importance of **diligent employment**. *A True Relation of Virginia* and *A Map of Virginia* reinforced this point, constantly repeating the need for *industry* in a fertile but demanding environment. Prototypically, these writings envisioned America as a place where hard-working young men and poor people could become self-sufficient and act in their own interests. Long before the liberal theoreticians of the Enlightenment, Smith maintained that land-ownership and private property were able to stabilize society. Believing that common wealth leads to commonwealth, Smith managed to do without the double-edged topos of America as a virgin to be raped or to be protected from modern corruption. Nor was Smith's America a paradise regained (in paradise there is no toil). Rather, the America of John Smith made a reasonable promise to those willing to exert themselves for their own and their community's welfare. Describing sustainable subsistence rather than sudden prosperity as the New World's boon, Smith's was an ideology of labor fulfilled,

Focus on Pocahontas

Pocahontas (ca. 1596–1617) was the daughter of Powhatan, a Native American chief in Virginia. She has become famous through Smith's account of how, as a small girl, she saved his life from execution at the hands of her father by shielding him with her own body. The historical accuracy of this account is dubious, however.



A nineteenth-century drawing of Pocahontas saving John Smith's life

extolling self-interested work and the satisfaction and safety that come with it.

Needless to say, there was a gap between these lofty ideals and the facts on the ground. Smith nearly despaired of the fortune-seekers in Jamestown, "ten times more fit to spoyle a Commonwealth, then either begin one, or but helpe to maintaine one" (*The Genrall Historie of Virginia* bk. 3, ch. 12). After he left in 1609, social and economic discipline in Jamestown deteriorated dramatically, as did relations with the natives. Virginia was saved from failure only when John Rolfe, the later husband of Pocahontas, developed a successful system of planting and exporting tobacco in 1612. However, to the extent that discourses create realities, it was important for the future course of North America that Virginia first described itself in terms of John Smith's socio-economic philosophy.

Writing in Puritan New England. A similar philosophy, with an additional ingredient, ruled Puritan New England. Calvinist theology crossed the Atlantic with those who founded **Plymouth Plantation** (1620) and the nearby Massachusetts Bay colony in Boston (1630). While holding fast to radical Protestant doctrines of divine sovereignty and predestination, these settlements developed flexible religious systems that balanced theological principles with the political and economic realities

Key Texts: Early American Literature

English Settlement (1584–1730)

Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of Guiana* (1595)
 John Smith, *A True Relation of Virginia* (1608), *A Map of Virginia* (1612)
 John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630)
 William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630/1648)
 Anne Bradstreet, "To my Dear and Loving Husband" (1641)

Revolutionary Literature (1730–1830)

William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789)
 Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple* (1791)
 Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland, or the Transformation* (1798),
Ormond, or the Secret Witness (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799),
Edgar Huntly (1799)
 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans*
 (1826)
 Washington Irving, "Rip van Winkle" (1819), "The Legend of Sleepy
 Hollow" (1820)

of an overseas colony. Rather than establishing strict theocracies, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay separated religious and political authority at the level of local institutions, but committed both to a unified social ideology based on Christian notions of justice and morality, most famously expressed in **John Winthrop's** lay-sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630). Later revolutionaries, such as John Adams, regarded this Congregationalism as a forerunner of the enlightened separation of church and state.

The tension between Puritan theology and colonial *realpolitik*, faith and facts, dominates early literature from Massachusetts. **William Bradford**, the first governor of Plymouth, chronicled his settlement's history in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written in two parts in 1630 and 1646–1648, and first published in 1856. Composed in the Puritan *plain style* which avoided ornamental rhetoric in favor of unadorned speech close to the vernacular, Bradford's book illustrates the mutual dependency of religious typology (i.e. the figural interpretation of worldly events as biblical symbols) and secular necessities. Everyday desires needed to be brought into accordance with a religious language that, in turn, gave meaning to the colonial experiences of displacement, exposure, and loss. Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography* (1646, published 1832) and the poems of **Anne Bradstreet** (written 1632–1672) bear witness to this sensual dimension of early American life. In fact, Bradstreet's records of her religious doubts and sexual longings for her

husband, sometimes described by modern scholars as covertly rebellious, were fully compatible with Puritan conceptions of faith and marriage. Later, American writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to H. L. Mencken and Arthur Miller found it convenient to turn the Puritans into exemplars of sexual repression and American exceptionalism, but the texts speak a different language.

The more the colony thrived, the harder it became for Bradford to negotiate between the settlement's worldly success and its religious purity. Thus, the second part of his chronicle laments the decline of faith among the colonists, turning *Of Plymouth Plantation* into a jeremiad, the admonitory tale of a better past, which according to Sacvan Bercovitch is one of the central genres of North American writing. However, what Bradford saw as impending failure was the outline of an unequalled success story: Massachusetts' slow rise to become a mercantile force in the British empire. Bradford writes:

[T]he people of the plantation began to grow in their outward estates, by reason of the flowing of many people into the country, especially into the Bay of Massachusetts. By which means corn and cattle rose to a great price, by which many were much enriched and commodities grew plentiful. And yet in other regards this benefit turned to their hurt, and this accession of strength to their weakness. [...] And this I fear will be the ruin of New England, at least of the churches of God there, and will provoke the Lord's displeasure against them. (ch. 23, "Anno Dom: 1632")

A similar fear informed one of the most famous Puritan self-descriptions, John Winthrop's "**city upon a hill**" passage from *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630). Frequently quoted as an example of America's self-confident sense of mission, on closer inspection Winthrop's sermon reveals more anxiety than triumphalism. Its historical and intellectual contexts would have nothing to do with the imperial aspirations for which it was so often appropriated:

Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission; [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles [...] and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant. [...] For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes



John Winthrop,
 Puritan writer and second
 governor of the Massa-
 chusetts Bay colony

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*

The conflicting claims of faith and facts structure *Of Plymouth Plantation* and the colonial imagination at various levels. Among other things, they frame Bradford's depictions of intercultural encounters. At one point, his chronicle relates how the English newcomers stumbled upon a store of Indian corn and freely helped themselves. Predictably, Bradford offers a typological interpretation of the event: "And here is to be noted a special providence of God, and a great mercy to his poor people, that here they got seed to plant them corn the next year, or else they might have starved, for they had none nor any likelihood to get any" (ch. 10). The question of who owns the corn seems to be conveniently avoided, because if it was placed by God, the taking of it cannot be theft. However, Bradford is thoroughly aware of the pragmatic vicissitudes of the situation, i.e. the fact that the Indians—potential trade partners and military allies—have stored the corn for purposes other than feeding the Christians. Therefore, he complements his religious interpretation

Interpretation

with the following remark: "Also there was found more of their corn and of their beans of various colours; the corn and beans [we] brought away, purposing to give them full satisfaction when [we] should meet with any of them as, about some six months afterwards [we] did, to their good content" (ch. 10).

Bradford's insistence that the corn was properly exchanged in a trade-off would be unnecessary if his view of the natives were guided by typological conviction alone. But an exclusive reliance on theological discourse is prevented in this case by Bradford's knowledge that his struggling community will be dependent on Native assistance and instruction—not least in order to learn how to properly plant and grow the seeds they have just borrowed, with the help of God, from their future neighbors. Even later military conflicts, such as the Pequot War of 1636, did not divide neatly among ethnic or religious lines, but combined tribal and colonial groups in coalitions of interest, often dictated by internecine power struggles in European and Native communities.

of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. (pt. 2)

still different in important ways from those of other nations, entangled histories and worldwide webs of communication notwithstanding.

3.1.3 | A Revolutionary Literature (1730–1830)

In fact, the eyes of all people were not on Massachusetts. The world—addressed also by Thomas Jefferson 146 years later in the *Declaration of Independence*—could not have cared less what a small group of sectarians was doing in some wild, far-away province. New England's pervading sense of provincialism explains a lot about the colonists' need for self-assertion. Nothing short of divine providence would legitimize their presence in this godforsaken place. Thus, in American writing, the declaration of communal cohesion has all too frequently been a sign of the natural lack thereof, from settler cultures clinging to their biblical self-images to citizens pledging allegiance to the flag of a country without a royal family, state religion, or long inherited symbols expressive of a common heritage. American nationalism is a strange phenomenon, for it has a strange history,

Emphasizing faith over works, seventeenth-century Protestantism constantly needed to balance its appraisal of individual experience with the mediating agency of religious institutions, embodied by pastors and ministers. From the beginning, the Congregational establishment of New England worked hard to contain its faith's inherent tendency towards **antinomianism**, i.e. the privileging of subjective spiritual justification over the communal letter of the law. But Puritanism's propensity for self-radicalization broke through again and again, for the first time in 1636 with Anne Hutchinson's ultra-Puritan rebellion against the ministers and magistrates of Boston. Hutchinson was banned and became an implausible martyr in later American narratives (among other things, she served as inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850, and was

Definition

→ **Puritanism**, which originated as a reform movement within the Church of England, greatly influenced American life and politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its adherents hoped to purify church and society through an emphasis on God's sovereignty, the individual experience of grace, and a generally skeptical attitude toward institutional hierarchies. The Bible was seen as the only necessary dogmatic authority. Faith, rather than good works, served as the most important way to salvation.

featured in the 1964/65 TV series *Profiles in Courage*, based on John F. Kennedy's 1955 book of the same title).

The Great Awakening. In the eighteenth century, antinomianism could no longer be so easily controlled. Following the travels of British Methodist minister George Whitefield (pronounced *Whitfield*), a wave of evangelical revivals collectively known as the **Great Awakening** swept the thirteen British colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. The Great Awakening changed America's religious landscape forever, challenging the dominance of Congregational (in New England), Quaker (in Pennsylvania) and Anglican (in the Southern colonies) establishments with a welter of new evangelical denominations that preached immediate grace and sensuous rebirth. Revivalists such as Gilbert Tennent and—to a lesser degree—Jonathan Edwards held that God's grace touches the believer suddenly and without mediators, in one supremely intimate yet eminently consequential moment of spiritual conversion. The evangelical vocabulary, with its insistence on *revival*, *regeneration*, *rebirth*, etc. put a high premium on sensual immediacy—an anti-institutional philosophy that resonated with the enlightened epistemologies of the day. Combined with spatially transgressive forms of communication (itinerant preachers such as Whitefield proved to be extremely adept in their use of the press), evangelicalism turned socially explosive. Belief in the spiritual benefit of transformative experience became increasingly widespread—and such a mentality was reinforced by the rise of modern practices of **publicity**, themselves inherently transformative and wide-spreading. Thus, the commercial marketing of charismatic preachers, the newspaper coverage of sensational mass awakenings, and the public competition of religious goods benefited the evangelical movement as much as it fostered a steadily growing, largely secular consumer culture.

Even though the Great Awakening was not an overtly political movement, it did more than diversify American religion: through its influence on colonial media, it paved the way for the revolt of 1776. As the first truly common experience of all thirteen colonies, it inaugurated a trans-colonial **public sphere**, which the secular elites of the American Revolution would put to political use in the 1760s and 1770s. Moreover, the Great Awakening drew many people from the lower classes and marginalized groups into Protestant churches and sects, staking out a place of public speech for women, African Americans, and Native Americans. The sentimental reform movements of the nineteenth century, most notably abolitionism, owe a good deal to the doctrines and practices of the Great Awakening, as does the literary rhetoric of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

In ideological terms, the Revolution would dissipate religious concerns in favor of issues of taxation, representation, and government. The revolutionary pathos of **Thomas Paine's** call for independence, *Common Sense* (1776), was still indebted to the rhetoric of evangelical enthusiasm, but after a decade of struggling statehood, there was a new language: the authors of the American Constitution (1789) founded a political entity that was resolutely secular. It was also resolutely innovative, even as it masked its originality with a vocabulary of classical republicanism. Most of all, it was *self-made*, not in the congratulatory sense of having freed itself from outside influences but in the sense of conjuring up its own presence. As Mitchell Meltzer observes, no nation and no national literature had ever "before been the product of conscious invention" in quite the same way. Hence the Constitution created a fictional voice called "**We the People**" whose authorship and authority "would somehow override the sheer arbitrariness of simply setting out" (110). According to Meltzer, the Constitution is "a made-up thing, and yet such knowledge has never inhibited the nation from believing in it. It has been the burden, and the originality, of at least one central strain of American literary tradition to suffer this ever-new ambition of finding poetic forms that will participate in the nation's founding paradox" (112).

Political Writing After the Revolution. One such paradox was the young nation's simultaneously expansive and post-colonial self-understanding. A brilliant solution to this dilemma was offered by the Constitutional definition of statehood, pre-

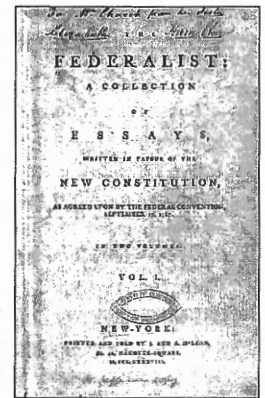
pared in the **Northwest Ordinance** (1783). The Northwest Ordinance held that the United States of America would not be a colonial nation on the model of European power politics. The existing thirteen states would not expand into Western territories, competing over borders and spheres of influence. Instead, the West would supply new states—*more* states, whose sheer existence and number would diminish the influence of the original polities and strengthen the power of the union.

The Federalist Papers. The question remained of how such an unlikely union could be made more probable. This question is at the core of American literature between the 1780s and the 1830s and beyond. The most sustained answer was formulated by **James Madison**, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay,* writing collectively under the pen-name Publius in *The Federalist Papers* (1787/88), their defense and explication of the new Constitution. Arguably America's biggest contribution to political thought, *The Federalist Papers* overhauled the philosophical inventory of the European Enlightenment to make it fit the conditions of a provincial power-to-be, a paradoxical nation that was hoping for continental proportions but committed itself to republican government. Neither the civic virtues of classical republicanism nor the market values of economic liberalism foresaw this possibility (while the catchphrases of both were cunningly reinterpreted by Publius). Thus, *The Federalist Papers* proposed an **oxymoronic policy of pluralizing consolidation** that defied received wisdom. If you want to curb the power of interests, Madison perplexingly argued, multiply their number. This doctrine was to be installed at all levels of social interaction: the more states, the lower the influence of individual states. The more religious denominations, the lower the risk of a state religion. The more social groups, the lower the chance that one will usurp public opinion. This was Madison's iconoclastic idea of an "**extended republic**": a sphere of political organization that would provide cohesion by encompassing dissimilar multitudes.

The punch line of this idea rested on the word *republic*, so ripe with associations of civic solidarity and face-to-face communication. Madison held that such republicanism could be achieved even in a geographically extensive and socially diversified society—if the involved players were integrated within the same system of communicative rules and procedures. It was a breathtakingly modern conjecture: rather than calling on people's morality, and rather than counting on virtuous rulers or

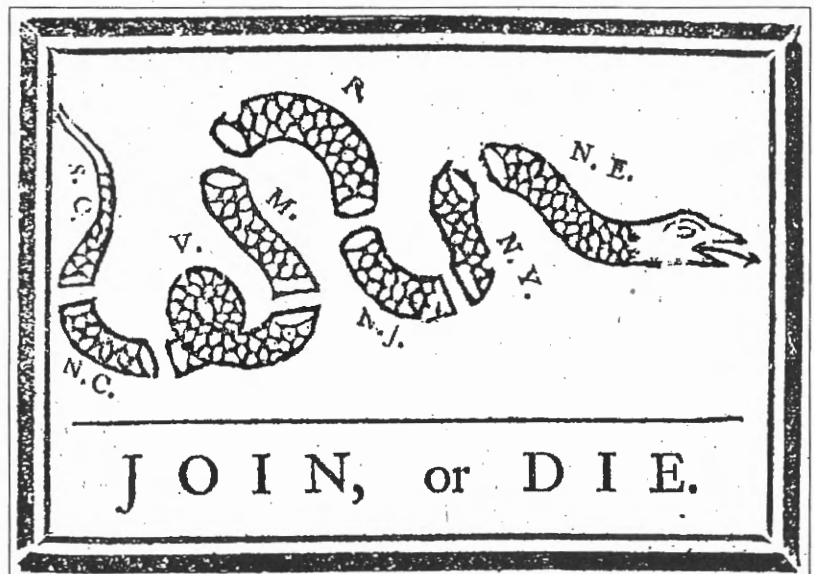
voters, Madison acted on the assumption that politicians are naturally power-driven and voters beholden to their local interests. Common welfare was nonetheless possible, if competition was enlarged and rendered dynamic to such a degree that no monopoly seemed probable, and if rival practices were restricted through procedural entanglements. At the level of national government, this translated into the Constitution's famous principle of **checks and balances**, i.e. the competitive overlap of administrative responsibilities and competencies, which was inconceivable under European conceptions of a mere 'separation' of powers.

At its heart, then, the extended republic was a procedural republic. From today's perspective, we can easily identify it as the first *nation-state* in the modern understanding of the term. In the context of literary studies, it is significant that Publius conceived of it as a dynamic construction—or to use Benedict Anderson's felicitous phrase, as an **imagined community**. What is meant by this is a space of virtual communication in which people do not have to personally know each other to recognize and respect one another as members of the same community. In other words, Madison's concept of the extended republic already imagined the United States as a **media nation**. It looked beyond the polite networks of correspondence that had characterized enlightened discourse in Europe and the colonies, welcoming instead the era of national newspapers and envisioning an intensely networked public sphere that could span an entire



Title page of the first printing of *The Federalist Papers*

A call to solidarity in the colonies (woodcarving in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*)



continent. It is no coincidence that the United States, built on this model of procedural governance, would in time become the world's major purveyor of stories and images. "What is an American," Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (who was no friend of the new Constitution) had asked before the Revolution. He had answered his question with a virtue-bound hope for European self-realization. *The Federalist Papers* cleared the ground for more modern conceptions that saw Americans recognizing themselves as Americans through technology-savvy acts of imagination, i.e. through the stories they tell and consume, and even more so through their shared participation in the same media public, which constantly reinforces itself, even when the media content is not about the nation.

3.1.4 | Fictional Writing in the Early Republic

Patriotic poems

However, the earliest examples of United States fiction, poetry, and drama frequently did choose the nation as subject matter. Many poems of the early republic were patriotic to the point of parody—and probably had to be, given the lack of collective heritage in a multi-state society. Only with writers such as Philip Freneau ("The Wild Honey-Suckle," 1786, "The Indian Burying Ground," 1788) and William Cullen Bryant ("Thanatopsis," 1821, "The Prairies," 1834) did American poetry gradually turn away from the over-wrought pathos of national epics such as Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) and embraced more self-reflective forms of literary expression. Meanwhile, American playwrights such as Royall Tyler dutifully reproduced the stage conventions of British Restoration drama and infused them with patriotic messages in plays such as *The Contrast* (1787).

In 1789, William Hill Brown published the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy*, a conventional sentimental story modeled on the works of Samuel Richardson (cf. section I.2.3.4). At the time, no one could have foreseen that the novel would become America's defining art form (together with the twentieth-century motion picture). No other literary genre has shaped American self-conceptions more thoroughly, and no other genre has been shaped as profoundly by American contributions. The first highlights, paving the way for the masterpieces of the nineteenth century, were written in the sentimental and Gothic mode. Su-

sanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), a best-seller of the time, told a cautionary tale of female waywardness and the dangers of masculine seduction, arguing for the ideal of well-educated, sexually vigilant women who contributed to the nation's welfare by fulfilling their civic responsibility as 'republican mothers.' Somewhat more irritatingly, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) employed epistolary multiperspectivity to great effect, granting a forceful voice to subjective desires that were quite at odds with the republican moral of the tale. Even more disconcerting were the Gothic novels of Charles Brockden Brown (no relation to William Hill Brown): *Wieland, or the Transformation* (1798), *Ormond, or the Secret Witness* (1799), *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799), and *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799). These writings painted an unsettling underground image of America at the turn of the century. In Brown's universe, subjective misjudgments and the dark urges of the soul always threaten to dispel the enlightened confidence of empirical reason on which the nation was supposedly built. *Wieland*, in particular, probed deep into the invisible undercurrents of American republicanism, setting its heroine and narrator Clara awash in a sea of uncontrollable intentions and unreliable voices (the tale centers on ventriloquism). Fully aware of the political dimension of the term, Brown's novel dealt with the ambiguities of representation; it bespoke deep-seated anxieties about the possibility of a rational social order based on *vox populi*. Brown sent a copy of his book to fellow writer Thomas Jefferson, but apparently never received an answer.

Brown was one of the first American authors who tried to live on his writing. However, professional authorship required a national literary sphere. Brown worked hard to create one, with *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* (1799–1800) and other magazine projects, but the time was not ripe. The first Americans who managed to make a living as professional authors (not counting Benjamin Franklin, who became rich with the annual publication of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, 1732–1758) were James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, but this was largely because of their success in the English market (both moved to Europe and spent large parts of their careers there). At the time, the search for a national literature mainly meant to demonstrate that the New World contained proficient material for established (read: British) artistic forms. Hence, Barlow, Freneau, Rowson, Foster, Brown, and after them



Rip van Winkle as imagined by the contemporary American painter George F. Bensell

Cooper and Irving adapted traditional literary genres to American subject matter. Irving transposed European fairy tales to the countryside of New York in “Rip van Winkle” (1819) and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820). Cooper, in turn, successfully Americanized the historical novel in his five *Leatherstocking* books (1823–1841), with Indian characters parlaying like highlanders from Walter Scott’s works (cf. section I.2.5.3). What marked these tales and novels as American were their settings. Thematically, however, they revealed an undertone of discontent in the so-called Era of Good Feelings after the War of 1812. Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) certainly perpetuated the crypto-imperialist romanticism of the ‘vanishing Indian’ motif, but they also voiced doubts about the ecological consequences of America’s Westward expansion. Irving even introduced a **new type of American hero** with Rip van Winkle, the anti-Franklin who sleeps through the Revolution and shrinks from domestic responsibility as much as he dreads political agitation, preferring to spend his time alone and unprofitably in the woods.

3.1.5 | Voices From the Margins

Less idyllic expressions of dissent animated the life-writing and post-revolutionary pamphleteering of authors from marginalized groups, especially women, African Americans, and Native Americans. Their strongest strategy was to remind the nation of its commitments, entangling its self-image in discursive contradictions. Early slave narratives such as *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) espoused capitalist values and evangelical spirituality in order to demonstrate the economic imperfection and moral depravity of the slave trade. Equiano was an important inspiration for the more openly oppositional and more explicitly African American writings of Frederick Douglass after 1845. Similarly,

Focus on Native Americans in Literature

Literary representations of Native Americans often relied on a few stereotypes. The motif of the **noble savage** combined the notion of the Indians’ social and cultural backwardness on the one hand and their primitive natural virtue and innocence on the other. The opposite of the noble savage is the intrinsically evil and treacherous **ignoble savage**. The motif of the **vanishing Indian** emerged from the assumption that the gradual displacement of the native population was inevitable, due to the impact of civilization and its superiority to native “savagery.” In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature it was often connected with nostalgia or a sense of tragedy. In recent years, studies have emphasized the degree to which these motifs were projections on the settlers’ part that served either to justify or to gloss over their political and military domination of native populations.

William Apess’s native autobiography *A Son of the Forest* (1829) used the rhetoric of the Protestant conversion narrative to object to Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal policy. Finally, the *Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments* (1848), mostly authored by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, turned away from the republican feminism of the young republic and demanded female suffrage—but it did so invoking the *Declaration of Independence*.

Ever since, American protest voices have repeatedly insisted on taking the nation’s founding documents at their word. This strategy, in turn, has produced powerful new descriptions of America, from tales of self-despair in the face of national hypocrisy to the conceptualization of **America as an unfulfilled promise**—a view of American history later called progressivism. From a less involved perspective, one can observe the generative dynamism at work in these American self-descriptions. There is perhaps no other literature so self-referential and at the same time so able to accommodate, even generate, oppositional perspectives by recourse to its own foundational fictions. In order to gauge the cultural force of this improbable semantics, it is necessary to read American self-descriptions *as self-descriptions*, not simply as Anglophone writings that happen to have been written in a non-European place.

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