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Constituent Characters:  
Representing the Electorate in the Early United States

By

Leila Alexandra Mansouri

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Samuel Otter, Chair

Professor Elisa Tamarkin

Professor David Lieberman

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## Abstract

Constituent Characters: Representing the Electorate in the Early United States

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

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In the early United States, literary culture was inextricably enmeshed with electoral politics. This dissertation explores the influence of the character sketch on that politicized literary culture, in which literary magazines held strong partisan affiliations, novelists moonlit as campaign biographers, and elected officials aspired to literary fame. The character sketch was a popular eighteenth-century genre whose depictions of individuals and social types generated aesthetic debates about how, exactly, written “strokes” and “outlines” could most clearly distill a character’s essence, as well as how a set of characters could collectively represent the polity as a whole. *Constituent Characters* traces how the character sketch was adopted by and adapted within early American campaign materials and shows that the aesthetic discourse surrounding the character sketch permeated how Americans discussed and imagined electoral representation from the Constitutional Debates through the 1840s. In doing so, the project reveals the surprisingly literary history of how Americans thought through questions like, What size legislature best represents the people? and What distinguished legitimate from illegitimate electoral district boundaries? It also points to the need for both scholars and writers to attend to how political and literary representation evolved together in the United States through an iterative process in which writers and readers continually renegotiated which character types the polity would collectively recognize, as well as the aesthetic terms on which it would do so.



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## Introduction

In the early United States, literature was enmeshed with electoral politics. During the years immediately following the American Revolution, many of the United States' most prominent literary figures also held elected office. Benjamin Franklin, for instance, wrote significant portions of his *Memoirs* – including those that detail his election in 1763 to Pennsylvania's colonial Assembly – while serving as governor of the new State of Pennsylvania. And, as President, Thomas Jefferson found his writings, especially the Declaration of Independence, alternately embraced by Republicans campaigning on his behalf and attacked by Federalist editors, who framed the stylistic failings of his prose as inextricably intertwined with his party's political treachery. In subsequent decades, these intersections between American literature and electoral politics only deepened as novelists moonlighted as campaign biographers, literary magazines claimed party affiliations, and writers sought patronage appointments – or even ran for office themselves.

Despite these material links between United States writers and their electoral system, literary scholars have rarely attended to the junctions between literary and electoral representation. Instead, literary scholarship has often presumed, as Dominic Mastroianni put it in *Politics and Skepticism in Antebellum American Literature* (2014), that “the political and ethical significance” of literature in the early United States “lies only partially, and often weakly, in its most overt engagement with political issues.”<sup>1</sup> Implicit in such arguments, which share an extended and august critical genealogy, is the conviction that “overt” politics is only ever a vulgar realm of partisan grandstanding, hackneyed rhetoric, social violence, and self-interested duplicitousness.<sup>2</sup> As such,

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<sup>1</sup> Dominic Mastroianni, *Politics and Skepticism in Antebellum American Literature* (New York: Cambridge

<sup>2</sup> Mastroianni identifies Stanley Cavell as the key node in this genealogy. Cavell's work at the intersection of philosophy and literature understood the politics of antebellum literature as closely linked to aesthetics and community-making but largely divorced from electoral or institutional structures (Mastroianni, *Politics and Skepticism*, 2-26). Also crucial to this genealogy was the influence of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Benedict Anderson, whose work encouraged a generation of literary scholars to treat speech and literary representation as inherently political acts constitutive of or disruptive to normative social and political power even when those acts of representation did not directly interact with “overt” politics. Leading scholarly works in this vein include Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008); Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford University Press, 1993); Jennifer Greiman, *Democracy's Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum American Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Sandra M. Gustafson, *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Stacey Margolis, *Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Nancy Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere*

scholars concerned with interpreting “the political and ethical significance” of American literature may at times note, for example, that a given literary work refers to “overt” political disputes or that its author claimed a partisan affiliation. However, they fail to treat American electoral pamphlets, campaign biographies, and political tracts as aesthetically complex acts of representation. Nor do they consider how either campaign literature itself, or other types of prose by writers entangled in the U.S. electoral system, might engage political questions that signify beyond a particular electoral race or partisan platform.

This tradition in the history of scholarship on early U.S. literature has contributed to a striking disjunction between how scholars of American literature address the politics of representation in the United States and how members of other disciplines treat that same issue. For historians and political scientists, representation is inseparable from electoral procedure but only superficially linked to aesthetics. John Phillip Reid’s *The Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution* (1989), for example, focuses on how theoretical issues such as “the mechanics of consent,” “the doctrine of shared interests,” and “virtual representation” correlated to specific – albeit evolving – electoral practices in Britain and the American Colonies. Likewise, Sean Wilentz’s account of democratic representation in *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (2005) centers on changes in electoral procedure, campaign norms, and legislative practices that, during the first half of the nineteenth century, redistributed political power once concentrated in a propertied elite. While these and other similar works frequently note the key metaphors through which Americans conceived of and described these aspects of or shifts in electoral procedure, aesthetics is, at best, peripheral to such scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Rather, for historians and political scientists, the crucial questions surrounding political representation in the early United States focus on how concrete electoral procedures translated theoretical concepts like “consent” or “democracy” into practice.

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*in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). When literary scholars have examined the intersections between American literature and political institutions or practices in the early United States, they have tended to focus on the Constitution, courts of law, or political theory. See, for example, Edward Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Brook Thomas, *Cross-Examinations of Law and Literature: Cooper, Hawthorne, Stowe, and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991). One important recent exception is Dana Nelson’s *Commons Democracy: Reading the Politics of Participation in the Early United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), which examines the relationship between early U.S. literature and the participatory democracy of town halls and local electoral races. However, *Commons Democracy* frames these forms of electoral participation in opposition to state and national representation, recreating, albeit with a new twist, the opposition between real and “overt” politics that has structured recent scholarship on early U.S. literature.

<sup>3</sup> See especially the work of F.R. Ankersmit, in particular *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), which examines the political import in the early United States of “liken[ing] a good legislature to an accurate portrait” that could “substitute for the democratic assemblage of the whole people,” 86-89.

Literary scholars, by contrast, treat the intersection of aesthetics and theory as central to the politics of representation – often to the point of ignoring or rendering incidental electoral practice. For instance, Christopher Looby’s *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (1997) and Eric Slauter’s *The State as Work of Art: the Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (2009) both argue that particular figures of speech were central to how Americans came to conceive of their representative government in the wake of the Revolution. However, their accounts of the conceptual import of, respectively, the notion of “the popular voice” and metaphors of “framing” give only scant attention to how those literary figures shaped the actual electoral structures through which the American polity effected its representation.<sup>4</sup> A similar pattern of oversight appears in literary scholarship examining the spread of democracy during the first half of the nineteenth century. While such scholarship takes the representation of democracy as its central concern, it focuses primarily on how literary and cultural forms of representation engage theoretically with democracy and only rarely examines how those forms also interacted with and helped change the structural shape of the American electoral system that accompanied democratization.<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation argues that, by attending only partially to the complex interrelationship between representational aesthetics, political theory, and electoral practice in the early United States, scholars invested in illuminating post-Revolutionary culture and politics have overlooked important ways all three interacted to shape how Americans represented their electorate. Key to this interrelationship was the fact that, in the early United States, literary and electoral representation were not merely analogous or informed by the same context but conceptually and materially intertwined. The same representational conventions that were developed in early American novels and critiqued by the United States’ first literary critics also structured campaign biographies and framed how Americans drew electoral boundaries. Likewise, the same elected officials and partisan operatives who shaped the contours of the American electoral system – for example by debating how large the United States Congress should be or pushing for the expansion of suffrage to all free white men – also wrote the novels, poems, essays and plays that present-day scholars read to search for the true political insights of American literature. As such, to treat electoral representation as separate from literary representation in the early United States is to miss how, for writers and/as politicians, the two were profoundly and reciprocally linked in both theory and practice.

Making possible this interplay between literary and electoral representation, as this dissertation will show, was a literary genre called the character sketch, which was immensely popular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and the early United States. Published both singly and in larger collections, character sketches attempted to briefly and wittily distill the essence of either an individual’s character or, more often, a

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Cahill’s *Liberty of Imagination* (2012) emphasizes links between aesthetic rhetoric – on, for, example taste, genius, pleasure, and the sublime – and political theory, but it gives only scant mention to how that interplay between aesthetics and political theory shaped or responded to specific electoral structures. See 157-162.

<sup>5</sup> See, especially, Barnes, *States of Sympathy*; Castiglia, *Interior States*; Greiman, *Democracy’s Spectacle*; Margolis, *Fictions of Mass Democracy*; and Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality*.

recognizable character type. Integral to this genre's popularity was the notion, first developed in early modern political works like Sir John Smith's *De Republica Anglorum* (1583), that a polity was best conceived of and represented as an interlocking set of social and moral character types. As rapid social change strained political theory's once stable and familiar set of character types, the sketched characters circulating in periodicals, novels, and compendiums, like *Characterism, or, the Modern Age Displayed* (1750), promised what political tracts no longer could: a record of the characters that, collectively, described the British polity as a whole. As such, in eighteenth-century Britain and the early United States, any given character sketch not only represented the particular moral or social type that was its subject but also both reinforced and extended the traditional framework through which a polity was understood as a coherent set of recognizable characters.

During this era, literary criticism about how to best "sketch" character became inextricable from unsettled questions about how representations of the polity rooted in character could allow for variety and change while remaining coherent, collectively legible, and accurate to that polity's true nature. Such criticism both elaborated and, at times, exposed contradictions within theories by John Locke, the Earle of Shaftsbury, and other empiricist philosophers regarding how to accurately categorize and represent the natural world and the characters it produced.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, this criticism activated a set of questions largely sidestepped by Enlightenment political philosophy concerning what made a representation of a polity, electoral or otherwise, representative.<sup>7</sup> Such attention to the aesthetics of the character sketch, with its twin investments in empiricism and

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<sup>6</sup> See especially, John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftsbury's *Second characters; or, The language of forms*, which was privately circulated and partially published in the early eighteenth century, ed. Benjamin Rand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914).

<sup>7</sup> Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* takes as a given seventeenth-century Britain's extant electoral structure. Locke notes the distortions caused by "rotten boroughs," whose small populations made them tempting targets for those who would buy their way into electoral office, and argues for enfranchising newer British towns that lacked MPs. Nowhere, though, does the *Second Treatise* consider what would be entailed in creating an electoral system from scratch or address the theoretical question of what makes electoral representation representative. In *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 170-171. Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu's 1748 *The Spirit of Laws* describes the variety of electoral structures used by the ancient democratic city-state of Athens and by more recent governments that mixed democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy. However, because Montesquieu believed large, geographically dispersed republics like the United States were unsustainable, he does not address the question of how they might be represented, Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, transl. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 124. Of the major Enlightenment political philosophers, only David Hume theorized a wholly original electoral structure, specifically a tiered system in which towns and parishes met to elect representatives, which in turn elected county magistrates and senators. However, Hume's ideal electoral system presumes an electorate evenly spread over a country such as Britain and as such likewise does not address how to structure an electoral system in a country as large and diverse as the United States or engage with the theoretical question of what makes electoral representation representative. "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects. By David Hume, Esq; A New Edition* (London: Printed for A. Millar in the Strand; and A. Kincaid and A. Donaldson, at Edinburgh, 1758) 273-277.



political theory, offered a ready forum for airing unresolved questions that troubled not only literary but also political representation in the eighteenth century. Among them: What differentiated a natural distinction from an unnatural distortion of the polity's natural order? and, What ensured a given representation would be clear, precise, and, most importantly, legible to the polity as a whole?

In the early United States, extensive use of character sketches in campaign literature and references to character aesthetics in debates about the future of the American electoral system fused literary concerns to electoral practicalities. During the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, character sketches permeated every aspect of early American electoral culture, especially early U.S. campaign literature, which adapted the character sketch form in order to disseminate information about candidates to a dispersed electorate. At the same time, representational concepts refined by literary critics shaped the private exchanges about, and the public debates over, how the U.S. Constitution should structure electoral representation. Through this embrace of the character sketch form and its attendant aesthetic discourse, the notion that a polity should be conceived of as a set of character types became integral not only to American literary fiction but also to early American electoral pamphlets, political cartoons, campaign biographies, and other election literature. Just as integral was the presumption that the character sketch invoked both literary conventions and electoral possibilities, such that the aesthetics of representing America's characters could not be separated from the politics of fully and accurately representing the American electorate.

This dissertation is divided into three sections, each of which explores how a particular critical debate regarding how to best "sketch" character came to structure a specific aspect of how American writers and politicians approached the unstable intersection of literary representation, political theory, and electoral practicalities in the early United States. Part I, "Representing Self-Determination," explores how literary and philosophical discussions about the balance between self-determination and collective legibility provided the theoretical framework for Constitutional Debates concerning the size and structure of the U.S. Congress. Fault lines in these debates, and in related debates about the restriction of electoral self-determination on the American frontier, cleaved to a critical divide about whether efforts to sketch the wide variety of newly emergent social types threatened to create a set of characters so large and various that its representation would render the polity as a whole illegible. Attending to how this divide informed Federalist and Anti-Federalist writings concerned with legislative size, this section shows how references to character in Benjamin Franklin's writings on elections and in partisan criticism in the early United States were not pro-forma invocations of Republican virtue. Rather, the debate reflects a nuanced aesthetic engagement with tensions intrinsic to the generic demands of representation structured by the character sketch.

Part II, "Caricature and the Gerry-mander," explores efforts by writers and artists to theorize the difference between character and caricature and examines how these efforts came to provide the aesthetic template whereby Americans imagined which electoral subdivisions were natural to the American polity and which were unnatural and arbitrary distortions. This section shows that difficulties differentiating legitimate from

gerrymandered electoral maps – despite the widespread conviction that the difference between the two should be self-evident – followed from literary critics’ inability to theorize a distinction between character sketch and caricature that could be consistently applied in practice. Partisan divides over the legitimacy of particular electoral districts reproduced uncertainty in literary criticism and empiricist philosophy about the reliability of categories formed by human perception and, especially, about whether such categories inevitably produced the arbitrariness and distortion associated with the caricature genre. The campaign rhetoric that linked caricature with gerrymandering therefore registered more than mere partisanship. Rather, such rhetoric grappled with the unease embedded within an electoral system whose legitimacy hinged on character sketches, the accuracy of which could never be absolutely determined since no reliable critical framework existed for distinguishing natural characters from unnatural and distorted caricatures.

Part III: “Constituent Parts and Democratic Wholes” explores how literary and electoral representation in a democratizing United States engaged with the idealized landed gentleman at the center of the British novel, one of whose function was to bring coherence to a diverse polity. Clear contradictions began to emerge in how early American campaign biographies, novels, and biographies of George Washington adopted and revised the landed-gentry narrative framework. These tensions reflected division and uncertainty among literary critics regarding whether democracy was compatible with a uniquely American literature that could represent the United States’ many distinctive characters. At the root of these tensions was pervasive confusion about whether and how a gentlemanly Washington could aesthetically unify America’s diverse and dispersed character types as the landed gentleman had unified Britain’s. By tracing how democracy eroded the social hierarchy that had previously worked to underpin the gentleman’s central role in representing the polity, this section reveals that such aesthetic confusion transcended its particular electoral moment, which saw the expansion of the franchise and the rise of Jacksonian populism. Rather, driving this disarray were profound incompatibilities between the United States’ democratic ideals and the politicized aesthetics of the character-sketch tradition – incompatibilities that produced unresolved questions about whether and how American democracy could be made representable, either literarily or electorally.

Together, these sections reveal that, in the early United States, the aesthetic terms through which Americans imagined and critiqued the representation of character were inextricably intertwined with the conceptual framework through which they evaluated the legitimacy of their electoral representation. The ways that American electoral literature promoted candidates, critiqued electoral structures, and conceptualized emerging problems of electoral representation both derived from and influenced the ways literary critics imagined the American polity as a set of characters that could be sketched. Unresolved aesthetic quandaries about the ideal nature, number, and manner of achieving coherence among these sketched characters structured persistent political divides about legislative representation, electoral boundaries, and democratization. And this intersection of character aesthetics, political theory, and electoral practice, in turn, inscribed how American writers, whose work and careers were often profoundly

entangled with electoral politics, understood “the political and ethical significance” of American literature.

By attending to the ways literary and political representation were reciprocally entailed in the early United States, this dissertation demonstrates the need for more nuance and precision in how historians and political scientists use aesthetic terms to describe electoral representation. For instance, F.R. Ankersmit differentiates “mimetic representation,” in which electoral legitimacy is tied to perceived resemblance, from “aesthetic representation,” which presumes “unavoidable difference” between the electorate and their representation.<sup>8</sup> Yet close attention to the precise literary terms that early U.S. elected officials chose in order to discuss electoral representation demonstrates that none, in fact, perceived any neat or stable distinction between electoral representation whose legitimacy is tied to resemblance and electoral representation that acknowledges “unavoidable difference.” Rather, during the Constitutional Debates, in campaign literature and on the pages of partisan literary magazines, writers and politicians were negotiating the principles of character aesthetics through which resemblance or difference might be imagined and recognized. As this dissertation shows, only by closely examining these literary and aesthetic negotiations, rather than reproducing or simplifying their representational metaphors, can present-day scholarship fully appreciate how early American politicians conceived of and sought to enact electoral representation.

Likewise, this dissertation points to the need for literary scholars to more carefully attend to the intersections between literary and electoral representation in discussions of American literature’s engagement with politics in the early United States. Essential to doing so is a reframing of how literary scholars approach character, as well as the character sketch as a genre. To date, most scholarship on character has hewed to a presentist approach that foregrounds the literary evolution of depth and individuality in novelistic character and downplays the typification that was central to literary conceptions of character up through the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> As a result, both scholarship tightly focused on fiction or theater and works – such as Christopher Lukasik’s *Discerning Character: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (2011) –

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<sup>8</sup> Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Blakey Vermeule’s *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), Alex Woloch’s *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and, to a lesser extent, Deidre Lynch’s *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and David Brewer’s *The Afterlife of Character, 1726-1825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) exemplify this critical impulse to privilege the literary evolution toward late-nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century understandings of character as a literary construct primarily invested in depicting depth and individuality. Woloch, Lynch, and Brewer attend to some of the ways in which typicality served as an important point of contrast in such depictions, but they nevertheless treat typicality as a mode to be transcended in literature’s inexorable evolution toward its present-day aesthetic values. As a result, scholarship has paid little attention to the generic constructs that informed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of character type. Likewise, it has neglected to explore how those notions in turn shaped, for example, the interplay that Christopher Lukasik’s *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) identifies between the literary, visual, and social senses of character in the early United States.

that fuse cultural studies with literary criticism have overlooked the generic structures that mediated character's social, political, and literary import. Only by examining how references to character within and beyond seventeenth through nineteenth-century literature informed and were informed by the character sketch genre and its attendant aesthetic discourse can scholars appreciate how character functioned as a fundamental framework for conceiving of self, society, and polity.

Careful readings of how American electoral materials invoked this generically situated sense of character, and vice versa, underscore that the polity Jacques Derrida imagined as being spoken into existence by the Declaration of Independence did not emerge as an abstraction within a vacuum.<sup>10</sup> Rather, that polity's constitution took place within a generic framework that organized both literary and electoral representation in terms of the character sketch. As such, the character sketch's extended and highly specific literary and political history was integral to how the American electorate negotiated what Jacques Rancière terms the "partition of the sensible," which at once divides and enables participation within the polity.<sup>11</sup> Only by recognizing the intricacies of the character sketch as representational framework, which emerges at the intersection of the aesthetic and the electoral, can literary scholars describe and appreciate what is political about early American literature.

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<sup>10</sup> See Jaques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," *New Political Science* no. 15 (1986): 7–15. See also Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 1-4; and John M. Murrin, "'A roof without walls': the dilemma of American national identity," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 333–48.

<sup>11</sup> Jaques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory and Event* 5 no. 3 (2001): n.p., Thesis 7.

## Part I: Representing Self-Determination

One of the early nineteenth century's most reprinted anecdotes about the founding of the United States' representative government comes from a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to editor and literary critic, Robert Walsh, on December 4, 1818. Jefferson began the anecdote by recounting his frustration with the changes the Continental Congress made to his draft of the Declaration of Independence. Benjamin Franklin was seated near him during the Congress's review and revision process, Jefferson explained, and the elder statesman "perceived that I was not insensible to these mutations." According to Jefferson, Franklin empathized with his younger colleague's distress. "I have made it a rule," he supposedly told Jefferson, "whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draughtsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body."

Jefferson's letter to Walsh then recounts how Franklin learned this "lesson" as a young journeyman printer. Franklin had a friend, an "apprentice Hatter" who, "having served out his time, . . . was about to set up shop for himself" and wanted "a handsome signboard, with a proper inscription":

He composed it in these words "John Thompson, *Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money,*" with a figure of a hat subjoined. But he thought he would submit it to his friends for their amendments. The first he shewed it to thought the word 'Hatter' tautologous, because followed by the words 'makes hats' which shew he was a Hatter. It was struck out. The next observed that the word 'makes' might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. If good & to their mind, they would buy by whomever made. He struck it out. A third said he thought the words '*for ready money,*' were useless as it was not the custom of the place to sell on credit. Every one who purchased expected to pay. They were parted with, and the inscription now stood 'John Thompson sells hats.' '*Sells hats*' says his next friend? 'Why nobody will expect you to give them away. What then is the use of that word?' It was stricken out, and '*hats*' followed it, – the rather as there was one painted on the board. So his inscription was reduced ultimately to 'John Thompson' with the figure of a hat subjoined.<sup>1</sup>

Though just one among half a dozen anecdotes that Jefferson sent in reply to Walsh's request for materials on Franklin's life and character, the anecdote quickly gained cultural currency. By 1820, it had circulated not only within reprints of Jefferson's letter but also as a stand-alone excerpt.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it continued to appear – more often than not extracted from its original context – in biographies of Franklin and histories of the founding era. And during the past four

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Robert Walsh, Jr., Dec. 4, 1818.

<sup>2</sup> "Extracts from a letter of Mr. Jefferson, dated December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1818, respecting Dr. Franklin," *The Rural*

<sup>2</sup> "Extracts from a letter of Mr. Jefferson, dated December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1818, respecting Dr. Franklin," *The Rural Magazine and Literary Evening Fire-Side* 1 no. 5 (Philadelphia), May 1820, 179-182; "Anecdote of Dr. Franklin," *The European Magazine and London Review* 78, Oct. 1820, 327.

decades, it has become a staple of American public history, quoted among other places on the Colonial Williamsburg website and in a PBS profile of “Citizen Ben.”<sup>3</sup>

Bound up with the anecdote’s – and Franklin’s – longstanding popularity is a persistent conviction that Franklin’s individual efforts to determine the course of his life were contiguous with colonists’ revolutionary struggle for independence. In popular depictions of Franklin, Franklin’s transformation from apprentice to wealthy printer, respected philanthropist, renowned scientist, and political leader anticipates and doubles the Revolution’s collective transformation of the American polity. Before the Revolution, the American Colonies were dependent on Britain, just as apprentices are dependent on their masters. After the Revolution, an independent United States attained freedom and political maturity, just as Franklin had when he left his apprenticeship at his brother’s Boston print shop and struck out on his own. In short, Franklin enacted on an individual scale the same transformation the American polity enacted on a collective scale: namely, the “emergence from self-incurred immaturity” and dependence that Immanuel Kant identifies as the essence of Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

Key to this popular narrative of Franklin is the assumption that individual and collective self-determination are mutually reinforcing. In this narrative, Franklin’s ability to chart a course for his own life – one that far exceeds the bounds of what was expected or socially permissible for the apprentice son of a soap boiler – intersects with and doubles the American colonies’ rejection of the limited powers of self-determination under British rule and their embrace of self-government instead. Franklin’s capacity for individual self-determination seems to naturally foster Americans’ collective self-determination as his efforts to further his own career as a businessman, scientist, and politician work to further the cause of American independence. And even after that collective self-determination is achieved, Franklin continues to support it as a mentor and example, not only to Jefferson, during and after the Declaration’s drafting, but also to the United States’ citizenry as a whole. In short, this popular take on Franklin’s life and the United States’ founding casts individual self-determination – not just of Franklin but of all Americans – as consistent with Americans’ collective embrace of electoral self-determination and representative governance.

Yet, even though Jefferson’s anecdote embraces the Franklin narrative’s distinction between dependent apprenticeship and self-determined maturity, it also hints at tensions between the individual and the collective that that narrative glosses over. These tensions emerge within the story of John Thompson, who can announce his individual self-determination as a maker and seller of hats only through a public sign whose enunciation is circumscribed by public consensus. The tensions are also evident in the deeply unresolved conflict between individual self-determination and collective self-

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<sup>3</sup> “An Anecdote of Doctor Franklin,” The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, <http://www.history.org/almanack/resources/jeffersonanecdote.cfm?showSite=mobile-regular> (accessed July 7, 2014); “Citizen Ben – Founding Father,” PBS.org, [http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/l3\\_citizen\\_founding.html](http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/l3_citizen_founding.html) (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.

determination that this depiction of Franklin offers. Here, Franklin mentors Jefferson as the young statesman is in the midst of proclaiming the United States' rights to self-determination, independent from Britain and the world. But that mentorship is premised on Franklin's refusal of the role of the collective draughtsman that Jefferson has taken on. Put another way, in this anecdote, Franklin's life-long embrace of individual self-determination leads him to avoid submitting his writing to "public bodies" even – or perhaps especially – when those public bodies seek to collectively assert their self-determination.

This section explores the ways such tensions permeated efforts in the early United States to imagine self-determination, whether electorally or literarily. Chapter 1: "Public Signs and the Limits of Self-Determination" shows that aesthetic debates surrounding the "character sketch" – a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary genre – heavily informed how debates about ratifying the Constitution conceived of electoral representation and self-determination. Specifically, the chapter demonstrates that, in discussions of American electoral representation, both Federalists and Anti-Federalists borrowed from eighteenth-century theories about how representations of character types could best balance the tension between self-determination and collective legibility. Through this excavation of the literary history underpinning the Constitutional Debates, the chapter explores the aesthetic and political implications of the intractable tension between individual and collective self-determination that popular narratives of Franklin had sought to elide.

Chapter 2: "Virtue, Franklin's Virtual Representation, and Self-Determination at a Distance" examines how the conflict between individual self-determination and collective legibility informed both Franklin's lived career as an elected representative and his written *Memoirs*. It does so through the lens of the British doctrine of "virtual representation," which held that even British subjects in the colonies who could not directly vote for any MPs were nevertheless virtually represented by MPs elected in Britain. The chapter reads Franklin's *Memoirs* as an effort to recuperate his political entanglements with and complicity in the system of virtual representation that Americans had rejected, as well as an attempt to imagine how the United States might place sustainable limits on self-determination without recreating the ills of the British electoral system. Central to this project was *Memoirs*' depiction of Franklin's own character, which made virtue impossible to distinguish from its virtual simulation. Through this depiction's engagement with the character sketch tradition, *Memoirs* grapples with a question at the heart of early U.S. electoral politics: how could local and individual self-determination be reconciled with the need to represent the diverse U.S. polity as coherent and legible to all Americans?

## Chapter 1: Public Signs and the Limits of Self-Determination

Like Jefferson's anecdote about Franklin and Thompson, early American debate about the future of American representation centered on the efficacy of signs. Brutus for instance wrote, in a November 1787 dispatch exhorting the citizens of New York to vote against ratifying the constitution, that:

[A] representation of the people of America, if it be a true one, must be like the people. It ought to be so constituted, that a person, who is a stranger to the country, might be able to form a just idea of their character, by knowing that of their representatives. They are the sign — the people are the thing signified.<sup>5</sup>

Brutus's claim was a common one among Anti-Federalists, who frequently argued that the Constitution's electoral system would produce a federal legislature that was too small. The result, Anti-Federalists claimed, would be an elected public body responsive not to the people as a whole but rather only to the elite from whom the troublingly small number of federal legislators would be drawn. According to Anti-Federalists, true political self-determination entailed elected public bodies that produced an aesthetic likeness precise enough to give, as Brutus puts it, "a just idea of [the] character" of the American people.

As both literary scholars and political scientists have traditionally understood it, Brutus's argument that the Federal legislature was too small to represent the people with sufficient likeness typified one side of a Constitutional debate in which verisimilitude was opposed to aesthetic refinement.<sup>6</sup> This account emphasized Anti-Federalist interest in a legislature that could mirror the electorate, ensuring political self-determination through representation that accurately reflected the many distinctive subgroups that comprised the polity.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, it highlighted Federalist investment in an electoral system that would "refine," "harmonize," and "assimilate" the electorate's disparate parts to give a coherent "portrait" of the people as a whole.<sup>8</sup> In their framing of the Constitutional debates,

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<sup>5</sup>"Brutus III," in Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Complete Anti-Federalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), I, 381.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Concept of Representation*, Pitkin contrasts Federalists' emphasis on "delibera[ting] on 'the common good'" with anti-Federalists' interest in "merely reflecting 'the will of the people,'" 193. In doing so, she anticipates the distinction Ankersmit would later make in general terms between "mimetic" representation, in which the legitimacy of a legislature or elected government is premised on the exactness of its resemblance to the polity as a whole, and "aesthetic" representation, in which a degree of "unavoidable difference" between the polity and a body of elected representatives is taken as a given, *Aesthetic Politics*, 28. Historians have typically mapped these aesthetic and theoretical distinctions onto political divisions between Federalists' interest in keeping power consolidated within a wealthy elite and anti-Federalist' interest in democratization, though as Wilentz notes, this schema erases important distinctions *within* both camps – like, for example, that between "country" and "city" democracy, *Rise of American Democracy* 13-39.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to "Brutus III," such arguments often cite Melancton Smith's "Speech at the New York Ratification Convention" (June 21, 1788) that argued representatives "should resemble those they represent; they should be a true picture of the people," *Storing*, IV, 15.

<sup>8</sup> In "Federalist 10," Madison argued that the purpose of representation was "to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens." In "Federalist 4," Jay argued that the proposed Constitution would "harmonize, assimilate, and protect the several parts and



scholars have tended to map this seemingly sharp aesthetic divide onto an equally sharp political divide between Anti-Federalists and Federalists as those who, respectively, wanted the American electoral system to be attuned to the will of the people and those who instead wanted the electoral system to buffer the people's base impulses and erratic whims. Likeness, in such accounts, becomes both an aesthetic proxy for an Anti-Federalist democratic populism and a binary condition, either extant or not, but inimical to degrees.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter shows that, contrary to such accounts, both Federalists and Anti-Federalists regarded likeness as key to meaningful electoral representation and that, during the Constitutional Debates, disagreements about the design of the U.S. electoral system often turned on the matter of how sufficient likeness was best achieved. Anti-Federalists disagreed among themselves about precisely how "genuinely like" the people legislatures should be. Many concluded, as Federal Farmer did, that "the best practical representation," in fact, must be "several degrees" removed from "the body of the people" because men tend not to elect "characters" truly like themselves.<sup>10</sup> And Federalists, far from rejecting likeness as an electoral principle, often invoked likeness in their defenses of the Constitution, as John Adams did when he argued that "the perfect of the portrait" offered by a "representative assembly" "consists in its likeness." (*Defense* qtd. Pitkin 60).<sup>11</sup> What emerges from close attention to the aesthetic language both Federalists and Anti-Federalists used was deep concern with and uncertainty about whether representational practices might produce a sufficient degree of likeness within the United States' electoral system.

Structuring these debates about how to create an adequately representative electoral system was an eighteenth-century discourse around the representation of character. Both Federalist and Anti-Federalist ideas about the role of likeness in electoral representation drew on theories developed in eighteenth-century debates regarding how many particularizing "traits" or "strokes" could be added to the representation of one's character and how many different characters could be included in a coherent representation of the polity. At stake in these aesthetic debates, as well as in the Constitutional Debates they helped shape, was the irresolvable tension between self-determination and the need for representation to be collectively legible. This discourse on the particularization of character influenced early American understandings of likeness and, consequently, its relationship to electoral representation. As such, attending to the

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members" of the American polity. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, Isaac Kramnick, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 126, 99.

<sup>9</sup> In current scholarship, this distinction is rarely explicitly argued for but rather presumed in how Federalist and anti-Federalist writings are framed. See, for example, *The Essential Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers*, edited by historian David Wootton, whose index includes entries for the terms "representatives should mirror those they represent" and for "representation as 'refinement' of democracy," 342.

<sup>10</sup> "Federal Farmer 9" (Jan. 4, 1788), *Storing*, II, 113-14.

<sup>11</sup> John Adams, *Defence of the Constitution*, 1787, quoted in Pitkin, *Concept of Representation*, 60. See also James Wilson's argument at the Constitutional Convention that, just as "the portrait is excellent in proportion to its being a good likeness," so too "the legislature ought to be the most exact transcript of the whole society," quoted in Pitkin, *Concept of Representation*, *ibid.*

intricacies of this discourse will reveal that underpinning these aesthetic and political debates was abiding uncertainty about how self-determination could be represented.

In October 1775 and January 1776, Mercy Otis Warren and John Adams exchanged a pair of letters in which commentary on the conditions that create tyranny and the ongoing political unrest in the American colonies slipped seamlessly into character sketches of America's prominent political actors. After her account of an ongoing dispute between the Massachusetts colonial legislature and the royal "board of Consellers," Warren distilled her impressions of "several . . . distinguished characters, who have an active and important part to exhibit in the American cause":

[General Washington] I think one of the most amiable and accomplished gentlemen, both in person mind and manners that I have met with. [General Lee,] who I never saw before, I think plain in his person to a degree of ugliness, careless, even to unpoliteness—his garb ordinary, his voice rough, his manners rather morose,—yet sensible, learned, judicious, and penetrating; a considerable traveller, agreeable in his narrations, and a zealous indefatigable friend to the American cause, but much more from a love of freedom and an impartial sense of the inherent rights of mankind at large than from any attachment or disgust to particular persons or countries. [General Gates] is a brave soldier, a high republican, a sensible companion, an honest man, of unaffected manners, and easy deportment.<sup>12</sup>

Adams replied with praise for these "three Characters drawn by a most masterly Pen." Referencing the renowned American portrait painter, John Singleton Copley, Adams added "Copeleys Pencil could not have touched off, with more exquisite Finishings, the Faces of those Gentlemen. . . . I hope posterity will see it, and if they do I am sure they will admire it."<sup>13</sup>

Adams continued his reply, not with his own character sketches of individual political leaders, but rather with a theory of political leadership premised on the sort of representation character sketches provided. "Part of a great Politician is to make the Character of his People," Adams explained. That leader's role was "to extinguish among them, the Follies and Vices that he sees, and to create in them the Virtues and Abilities which he sees wanting." Such a leader, in other words, was akin to an artist or a writer of character sketches who honed and refined his representation by emphasizing desired traits and erasing or minimizing what did not belong. Adams was skeptical that America had a leader with such skills, lamenting, "I wish I was sure that America has one such Politician, but I fear she has not." Then he entreated Warren to enter into a "Bargain" with him that promised to develop in him the very sort of representative talent he feared America lacked. If Warren would agree to do the same, he would "draw the Character of every new Personage I have an opportunity of knowing. . . . My View will be to learn the Art of penetrating into Mens Bosoms, and then the more difficult Art of painting what I shall see there."

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<sup>12</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, Watertown, October 1775.

<sup>13</sup> John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Braintree, Jan. 8 1776.

Adams's and Warren's casual familiarity with both the practice of sketching characters and the intuitive links between this practice and politics reflects how thoroughly the character sketch genre and the discourse that surrounded it had penetrated transatlantic literary culture by the end of the eighteenth century. The genre's popularity had begun in the early 1600s, when the translation and republication of Theophrastus's *The Characters* set off a burst of character sketch production. In England, works like Joseph Hall's *Characters of Virtues and Vices* (1608), Thomas Overbury's *Characters* (1614), and John Earle's *Microcosmography* (1628) published sketches of types – such as the Young Raw Preacher, the Flatterer, the French Cook, and the Ordinary Widow – in vast and widely popular compendiums, many of which were repeatedly reissued and expanded.<sup>14</sup> Similar works appeared throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries in French, Dutch, and German.<sup>15</sup> Character sketches also appeared individually in early novels and periodicals, where they offered representations that, even when based on recognizable individuals, nevertheless emphasized social and moral typicality.<sup>16</sup> In addition to these published works, character sketches also routinely featured in private correspondence. Indeed, mastering the character sketch form was understood as key to becoming a person of letters. Ralph Johnson's *The Scholar's Guide from the Accidence to the University* (1665), for instance, offers “Rules for Making a Character” alongside rules “Rules of Spelling,” “Rules for . . . Epistles,” and “Rules for Making a Verse,” among others.<sup>17</sup>

While such character sketches, both those published and those privately circulated, traded heavily on wit and humor, they nevertheless aspired to the lofty, philosophical aims of “penetrating into Mens Bosoms” and conveying those insights about human nature to the wider public. As Henry Gally put it in his 1725 “Essay on Characteristic-Writings,”

There is no Kind of polite Writing that seems to require a deeper Knowledge, a livelier Imagination, and a happier Turn of Expression than the Characteristic. Human Nature, in its various Forms and Affections, is the Subject; and he who wou'd attempt a Work of this Kind, with some assurance of Success, must not only study other Men; he has a more difficult Task to perform; he must study himself. The deep and dark Recesses of the Heart must be penetrated to discover how Nature is disguis'd into Art, and how Art puts on the Appearance of Nature. This Knowledge is great; 'tis the Perfection of Moral Philosophy.

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<sup>14</sup> John William Smeed, *The Theophrastan 'character': the history of a literary genre* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985),

19-35. The Hall, Overbury, and Earle works each appeared in multiple editions that varied in title. For clarity, the text of this dissertation refers to them by the titles used by Smeed, while the specific editions consulted during research for this project are listed in the bibliography.

<sup>15</sup> Smeed, *Theophrastan 'character,'* 47-63 (France), 82-100 (Germany and Switzerland), 101-113 (Vienna).

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Johnson, *The scholars guide from the accidence to the university, or, Short, plain, and easie rules for performing all manner of exercise in the public school* (London: Printed for the Pierrepont at the Sun in St. Paul's Church-yard, 1665), 1, 15, 16.

As Gally pointed out, mere study of “Human Nature” was not sufficient to the task of writing characters. Rather, the “peculiar Features” of a person’s “Mind” and habits “must be represented . . . so the Picture may strike, and every Reader, who is concern’d in the Work, may presently discover himself; and those, who are unconcern’d may, nevertheless, perceive a just Correspondence between that Piece and Nature.” The character sketch, in other words, promised a form of representation that brought a natural artistic order to the “deep and dark Recesses of the Heart” and ensured that order was legible and meaningful to those in society at large. In doing so, the character sketch fused Enlightenment aspirations – which sought to comprehend and bring order to a world shrouded in ignorance – to an aesthetic regime that aspired to leave the “Reader . . . uncertain, whether the Character that lies before him, is an effect of Art, or a real Appearance of Nature.”<sup>18</sup>

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writings on the character sketch, this idealized notion that character sketches should enable readers to recognize themselves and others rested on an aesthetics that deftly balanced particularity and abstraction. As Gally put it, “A consummate Delicacy of Sentiments, and an exquisite Judgment are the very Soul of *Characteristic-Writing*; for every particular Stroke, as well as the whole Character, has a proper Degree of Perfection.” To arrive at this ideal, writers had to “sketch” each character with an appropriate number of “strokes” or “traits.” Deviation from this ideal occurred either by writing characters that were “too general” or by “dwell[ing] too long” on the details of a character, “mix[ing] in ‘em so many Particulars and unnecessary circumstances” such that the character “represented the irregularities of life”.<sup>19</sup> Other writers echoed these concerns in reviews that critiqued character sketches alternately for indulging in dull, witless abstraction or for excessive particularity that rendered characters muddled and “overcharged.”<sup>20</sup> Implicit in such criticism was an aspiration toward an aesthetics consonant with the Enlightenment notion that each thing or category had an essence that could be distilled and precisely described. As Shaftsbury put it, there is a “note or character of nature” that encapsulates the “natural habit, constitution, [and] reason of [any given] thing.”<sup>21</sup> Writers of character sketches sought to describe that “natural . . . constitution” or “character” without adding any extraneous details that distracted from that essence.

Driving this search for an aesthetic balance between particularity and abstraction was a recognition that character sketches, like signs of any kind, relied on compression to achieve their representative aims. Character sketches could never hope to record in exacting detail the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries’ endlessly particular array of persons – especially since, throughout the transatlantic world, people felt increasingly empowered to “self-fashion” identities that recombined, modified, and transformed

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Gally, “A Critical Essay on Characteristic-Writings,” in *The Moral Characters of Theophrastus. Translated from the Greek, with Notes* (London: Printed for John Hooke, at the Flower-de-luce over-against St. Dunflan’s Church in Fleet-street, 1725), 29-31.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 39, 86, 67.

<sup>20</sup> See Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 47-56; Smeed, *Theophrastan ‘character’*, 65-67.

<sup>21</sup> Shaftsbury, *Second Characters*, 101. For a more extensive discussion, see Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 39-41.

existing social roles and norms.<sup>22</sup> In fact, any attempt at elaboration would undermine the genre's aim of cataloguing and making legible "Human Nature . . . in its various Forms and Affections" since, without compression, character sketches could not distil what was essential in each of those "Forms and Affections." Rather, as Gally put it, character sketches required "much to be contain'd in a little Compass."<sup>23</sup>

However, while writers readily acknowledged this need for compression in the abstract, they wrote within a rapidly changing society that rendered difficult and uncertain the task of differentiating what was essential from what was extraneous in a character. Take, for instance, B. Walwyn's 1782 *Essay on Comedy*, which argued that "[e]very trait" in a character should be "consistent with each other" and that characters: should be congenial with human nature at all times, and in all places. A particular fop, in being known to his acquaintance, may entertain that part of the audience, but he will never be a proper character of a vain man, for nature at large to contemplate. Particular characters only suit time and acquaintance. General characters suit the world and futurity. A temporary writer is a meteor, that is loft while it glares along the atmosphere of applause. A Writer of genuine character is a fixed star, whose brilliancy is an everlasting ornament to the dome of Fame.<sup>24</sup>

Ostensibly, Walwyn's account of the difference between "particular" and "general" characters reifies characters whose concise abstractions of human nature are stable across time and space. As he puts it later in the passage, "Particular characters only suit [their] time and acquaintance" because their ephemeral specificity renders them meaningless to any who do not happen to be personally acquainted with them. By contrast, "General characters" like the "vain man" are synonymous with "genuine character[s]" by virtue of the fact that their abstractions are "congenial with human nature at all times, and in all places."

However, this description of "general" and "particular" characters tacitly acknowledges the fact that the aesthetics of particularity and abstraction could not readily be separated from the composition of the society that was reading, as well as being portrayed in, a given set of character sketches. In Walwyn's description, what distinguishes a "particular fop" from a "general" and therefore "genuine" "vain man" is the fact that the latter character's vanity is marked by traits that a given society perceives as consistent across time and space. The "particular fop," on the other hand, is a vain man whose vanity is expressed in ways that are newly in fashion or unique to a particular

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<sup>22</sup> See Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Gally, "Essay," 43. Compressing and reifying the social and moral abstractions that comprised "human nature" was so essential to the character sketch genre that, at least according to some critics, adding anything inessential risked transforming a character sketch into something else entirely. Gally, for instance, complained that in Jean de La Bruyère's character sketches, the French writer had "drawn into the Composition" many particulars "which, in Truth, are not essential to the main Design" and, as a result, "have quite chang'd the Nature of the Character, and converted it into a History, or rather a little Romance." Generalizing from this, Gally added "'Tis true, Histories are Pictures as well as Characters; but yet there will ever be as wide a Difference between 'em, as there is between a Picture at full Length, and one in Miniature," *ibid.*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> B. Walwyn, *An Essay on Comedy* (London: Printed for M. Hookham, Bond-Street; Miss Davis, Corner of Sackville-Street, Piccadilly; and J. Fielding, Paternoster-Row, 1782), 15.

locality. As such, Walwyn's discussion of "particular" and "general" characters highlights a set of unresolved question at the heart of the character sketch's representative project: How, amidst a rapidly changing society, were writers to distinguish the essential "character[s] of nature" from the transitory particulars of fashion? To what degree was this distinction based on qualities intrinsic to a given character? And, To what degree was it instead a matter of how variable and how particular a character type could become while nevertheless remaining collectively legible?

The stakes of these unresolved questions were not only aesthetic and epistemological but also political. For centuries, Britain had conceived of its polity as a stable, ordered collection of character types whose groupings of people that occupied similar social roles were, as Elizabeth Fowler argues, "instrumental in the process of fitting human beings into the positions offered by the polity."<sup>25</sup> Political treatises such as John Smith's 1583 *De Republica Anglorum* relied on the notion of a polity comprised of character types to structure their political theories. Smith, for instance, organized his account of English governance with chapters on "Gentlemen (*nobilitas major* and *nobilitas minor*), Esquires, Citizens and Burgesses, Yeomen, and laborers ('the fourth sort of men which do not rule')."<sup>26</sup> This mode of imagining the polity through types also registered in literary works like Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, whose "Prologue" introduces, among others, "the Knight," "the Pardoner," "the Miller," "the Prioress," "the Franklin," "the Squire," "the Manciple," "the Man of Law," "the Merchant," "the Yeoman," and "the Guildsman." As Fowler points out, the relationship between such idealized types and medieval Britons' lived realities was fraught; such character types, or "social persons" as Fowler calls them, were analogous to ghosts, existing not in the messy world of everyday life but rather in the shared textual framework of how that life was imagined.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, such character types provided an essential complement to the notion of the "body politic" by offering a shared set of categories through which to imagine that whole's constituent parts.

Even as the massive social and political changes of the early modern era strained this mode of imagining the polity, the notion of a polity as a set of interrelated character types nevertheless persisted, albeit piecemeal, in the literary culture of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century character sketch. The sets of character types in circulation inevitably suggested some sort of larger, comprehensive whole. And, while it is unclear the degree to which individual writers conceived of their character sketches through this political lens, collectively they produced a relatively stable set of types that regularly featured in and helped organize their society. Moreover, compendiums, like *Characterism, or, the Modern Age Displayed*, and novels of social circulation, in which a central character encountered a vast array of social character types, reinforced this traditional sense that a set of character types could describe a whole polity.<sup>28</sup> Even

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<sup>25</sup> Folwer, *Literary Character*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 184.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> See Lynch, *Economy of Character*, especially 54-56, on this interest in the whole. See also Smeed, *Theophrastan 'character'*, 14-15 on the critical debate over whether the characters of Chaucer's *Prologue*

literary critics tacitly acknowledged this political tradition in their theorizations of aesthetic particularity and the proliferation of new character types it was producing. Gally, for instance, ascribed the “agreeable Variety of original Characters” in circulation in eighteenth-century British writings to the fact that “Moderns in general, and the *English* in particular, have far excelled the Ancients” in developing diverse polities.<sup>29</sup>

Within this context, literary critics’ theories on the aesthetics of character were inextricably entangled with growing fears that Britain’s rapidly diversifying society would strain the framework through which Britons had traditionally imagined their polity to the point of incoherence. Indeed, the eighteenth-century burst of critical interest in theorizing the aesthetics of describing “human nature at all times, and in all places” coincided with the rapid expansion of the number of different character types that appeared in periodicals and books.<sup>30</sup> As Lynch notes, the question of which characters were considered overly particular – or, as Gally put it, “far fetched” – was inextricable from efforts “to use the device of the character to fabricate a sense of the typical and so a sense of social coherence.”<sup>31</sup> As such, inseparable from critical concern about character sketches that were “far fetched,” overly “particular,” or internally inconsistent were unresolved questions about how much aesthetic strain the notion of a polity as a set of character types could stand. How particularized or inconsistent could a given character type be without becoming illegible to large parts of the populace? How many new “Original” characters could be introduced before the set of character types in print became so numerous that it was impossible to conceive of the polity as a whole? And how could writers ensure that, in depicting this variety, they were not led astray by ephemeral local fashion but remained true both to their polity’s nature and to human nature in general?

Compounding these concerns was a related fear that aesthetic and political self-determination might be mutually reinforcing. As William Temple put it in a passage later quoted by Gally, the “greater variety in Britain’s ‘Characters’” might be attributable to not only “the Nature of People or the Clymat” but also Britain’s “Ease of Government

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to *The Canterbury Tales* should be considered generic precursors to seventeenth-century character sketches.

<sup>29</sup> Gally, “Essay,” 94-95.

<sup>30</sup> While the earliest character sketches of the seventeenth century focused, as Theophrastus had, on a small set of moral types, following the publication of Overbury’s *Characters* in 1614, the variety of characters in print rapidly expanded. Seventeenth-century characters included “the Executioner,” “the Rope-Maker,” “the Petty French Lutanist,” “the Translator,” and “the Chimerical Poet,” to name just a few of the dozens that appeared in that century’s collections, Smeed, *Theophrastan ‘character’*, 38. These numbers only further expanded in the eighteenth-century, peaking in the same decades that Gally, Walwyn, Joseph Warton and others published their treatises fretting about whether excessively “particular” or “over-charged” characters could be true to human nature, *ibid.*, 65. The disconnect between this critical concern and the actual practice of character sketch publication was striking. In the early- to mid-eighteenth century, new character types appeared weekly in magazines: works like John Earle’s *Microcosmography* were reissued in expanded form, novels like *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *Joseph Andrews* (1742) incorporated character sketches into their picaresque surveys of British society, and a new collection *Characterism, or, the Modern Age Displayed* (1750) promised a comprehensive account of the moral and social types of the era, Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 54-58.

<sup>31</sup> Gally, “Essay,” 89. Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 54.

and the Liberty of Professing Opinions and Factions, which perhaps our neighbors may have about them but are forced to disguise, and thereby may come in time to be extinguished.” He continues:

Plenty begets Wantonness and Pride. Wantonness is apt to invent, and Pride scorns to imitate; Liberty begets Stomach or Heart, and stomach will not be Constrained. Thus we come to have Originals, and more that appear what they are; we more Humour because every Man follows his own, and takes a Pleasure, perhaps a Pride to shew it. On the contrary, where the People are generally poor, and forced to hard Labour, their Actions and Lives are all of a Piece. Where they serve hard Masters they follow his Examples as well as Commands, and are forced upon Imitation in small Matters as well as Obedience in great: So that some Nations look as if they were cast all by one Mould, or Cut out all by one Pattern (at least the common People in one and the Gentlemen in another). They seem all of a sort in their Habits their Customs, and even their Talk and Conversation, as well as in the Application and Pursuit of their Actions and their Lives.

Here, Temple describes how political freedom and representative license create a self-reinforcing feedback loop as “every man follows his own” and “takes . . . Pleasure and . . . Pride to shew it.” When men are given “liberty” to determine how they represent themselves to their fellow citizens, their unconstrained self-expression brings into the open the natural diversity of human nature, which those in more repressive political environments are “forced to disguise.” And because men naturally “scorn to imitate” one another when they have the option to choose how they represent themselves, such freedom not only allows more members of the polity to “appear what they are” but also in fact creates “more Originals” than occur in more repressive political environments. Conversely, political and social restrictions on freedom of personal expression create a negative feedback loop, the result of which is not only that people are “forced to disguise” themselves but also that, because members of such a polity do not have visible models of free self-expression, the natural diversity of “Original” characters is, over time, “extinguished.”<sup>32</sup>

Put more generally, within the framework developed by eighteenth-century literary critics like Gally, Temple, and Walwyn, questions of the political freedom one had to determine self-representation was inextricable from aesthetic questions about the proper balance of particularization and collective legibility. The aesthetic precepts that maximized individuals’ freedom to represent themselves in ways that most precisely described their true natures did not merely risk rendering those individuals illegible to the larger collective. They also destabilized the aesthetic and political categories through which members of that collective conceived of one another and, over time, rendered that collective an endlessly particularized and thus incoherent whole. Conversely, the aesthetic precepts that best ensured members of a collective would remain legible to one another not only limited the ability of individuals to represent themselves in ways

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<sup>32</sup> Sir William Temple, *Miscellanea. In Two Parts* (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, at the Judge’s-Head in *Fleetstreet*, 1697), 357-361.



accurate to their true natures but also, over time, created a polity whose members were more alike. This lack of diversity would ostensibly simplify the task of representing such a polity through a set of character sketches. But this representation's claim to likeness would be premised on a suppression of individual self-determination and a rejection of the notion of particularized likeness that such aesthetic and political freedom enabled.

Americans wrestling with how to put electoral self-determination into practice found in this aesthetic discourse on character a ready theoretical framework that offered a more nuanced approach to likeness's role in representation than historians or literary scholars have heretofore appreciated. For instance, scholars often treat John Adams's 1776 remark – that an assembly “should be in miniature . . . an exact portrait of the people” – as a straightforward articulation of electoral representation premised on exacting likeness. However, the ambiguous pronouns in Adams's subsequent comment – that “It should think, feel, reason, and act like them” – troubles any notion of simple mimesis by raising the question of whether such an assembly was a single collective public body – one capable of thinking, feeling, reasoning, and acting in unison – or a set of individual persons, as one might expect to find in a miniaturized but exact “portrait of the people at large.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, like the efforts of eighteenth-century characteristic writers both to portray the polity as a whole and to catalogue its constituent parts, Adams's metaphor left unresolved whether the coherence and legibility of a whole or the precision and particularity of its parts should be privileged when the two inevitably came into conflict.

Moreover, as Slauter shows, that fraught metaphor of miniaturization existed in tension with Adams's repeated assertions elsewhere that the power of representation should be “depute[d] from the many, to a few of the most wise and good.” When read together with his miniature portrait metaphor, Adams's arguments for deputing representation begs the same questions the era's theorists of character aesthetics had raised: What, if any, relationship existed between the true representation of a character's essence and an exactly mimetic particularization? As critics like Gally and Walwyn had argued, excessive detail could actually work against efforts to represent a subject's “natural” “constitution” or “character,” to use Shaftsbury's terms. Such criticism describes a fraught relationship between likeness and representativeness – one in which some degree of likeness is crucial but too much or the wrong kind of likeness would, paradoxically, misrepresent the very thing it purports to exactly copy. As Adams's writings illustrate, these doubts, together with the tradition of characteristic writing that generated them, formed a crucial theoretical backdrop for Americans struggling to think through how both individual electoral representatives and the national legislature as a whole might meaningfully carry out their representative functions.

Crucially, the figurative language linking electoral representation and the representation of character in early American tracts, pamphlets, and private letters imported many of the uncertainties registered in eighteenth-century criticism – especially

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<sup>33</sup> Adams's remarks are quoted in Slauter, *State as a Work of Art*, 128. For examples of how scholars have drawn on Adams's words in arguments concerning likeness in electoral representation, see Slauter's discussion of Ankersmit and Pitkin, *ibid.*, and Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics*, 28.

those regarding whether and how aesthetic principles might affect the way a people imagined their polity or even shape that polity itself. For example, in his letter to Warren, Adams juxtaposed an aesthetic lament that his own characters “dawb on the Paint too thick [and have] Features . . . very strong” with his political thoughts on the act of representing “the Character of [the] people.” Specifically, Adams wrote, “the Part of a great Politician” is “to make the Character of his People; to extinguish among them, the Follies and Vices that he sees, and to create in them the Virtues and Abilities which he sees wanting.”<sup>34</sup> Taken in isolation, Adams’s latter comment seems merely to reiterate Republican truisms about cultivating virtue in the electorate. However, read alongside his remarks on character aesthetics, the comment implies an analogy between the political labor of the elected representative and the aesthetic labor of the characteristic writer or portrait artist. Both must draw out traits that are essential while eliminating those particulars that would be inconsistent with and thus mar the character being depicted.

Moreover, in both cases, the determination regarding which traits to emphasize involves a negotiation between specific historical circumstance and universal characteristics – or between an infinitely complex and multifaceted reality and the set of characters through which, in the judgment of the artist or politician, a coherent and recognizable portrait of the polity is made possible. For critics like Gally and Walwyn, that negotiation took place through a discussion of aesthetic norms regarding particularity that, they believed, would best hone the character sketch’s ability to make legible the “Forms and Affections” of “Human Nature.” In Adams’s case, that negotiation both becomes more explicitly political and takes on a moralizing cast. However, it nevertheless still fundamentally describes finding a balance between blind faithfulness to the nature of its subject and overly-exacting likeness that would entail representing the electorate’s “Follies and Vices.” Such balanced political representation amounted to clarification of character – one that, like Gally’s notion of good characteristic writing, made character plain both to outside observers and to members of the polity themselves.

Viewed through this aesthetic framework, debates about the size of the U.S. legislature reveal not a clear-cut distinction between an Anti-Federalist embrace of mirroring likeness and a Federalist investment in undemocratic “refinement” of popular sentiment. Rather, what emerges are uncertain efforts to grapple with the tension between individual self-determination and collective legibility. In critiques of Federalists’ constitutional designs – viewed as overly limiting to Americans’ ability to determine their representation for themselves – Anti-Federalists often mobilized the aesthetic logic of characteristic writers who favored expanding the number and specificity of character types. For instance, Brutus argued that:

One man or a few men, cannot possibly represent the feelings, opinions, and characters of a great multitude. . . . [Instead,] to have a proper representation of [the polity], each class ought to have an opportunity of choosing their best informed men for the purpose . . . [such that] in [the] assembly the farmer, the merchant, the mechanic, and other various orders

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<sup>34</sup> John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Braintree, Jan. 8. 1776.

of people, [would] be represented according to their respective weight and numbers.<sup>35</sup>

Here, Brutus's political logic echoes many of Temple's claims about how aesthetic norms foster an open society. As with Temple's argument, the core of Brutus's claim about legislature size rests on the assumptions that liberty requires "every Man" have the freedom to "follow his own." Oppressive power, by contrast, "force[s]" men "to disguise" their true characters and "thereby over time" may "extinguish" those characters from the polity. In Brutus's argument, electoral representation befitting a free people requires a similar freedom to choose elected representatives from one's particular class or social type. Like Temple, Brutus presumed that political self-determination and the variety of characters produced by a free society are reciprocally entailed.

Anti-Federalist John De Witt relied on a similar logic in his riposte to John Adams's comparison of the national legislature to a portrait:

[W]ho are this House of Representatives? A representative Assembly, says the celebrated Mr. Adams, is the sense of the people, and the perfection of the portrait, consists in the likeness. -- Can this Assembly be said to contain the sense of the people? -- Do they resemble the people in any one single feature?<sup>36</sup>

Here De Witt's metaphor, following Adams, is not the polity as a set of interrelated character types but rather the polity as a "portrait" that gives a sense of the character of the people as a whole. However, here too De Witt, like Temple, links representation that is consistent with liberty to the freedom to aesthetically "follow [one's] own." In this case, freedom registers through the ability to particularize in a way that creates an exacting resemblance. Unlike Adams, who wished to coherently represent the polity's character by emphasizing certain traits and deemphasizing others, De Witt argues for an aesthetics and electoral politics grounded in a more granular notion of "likeness." Key to this likeness was an assembly large enough to represent each particular "single feature" of the polity. Only by doing so, De Witt suggests, could American electoral representation offer a true "portrait" of the American electorate.

Though Brutus emphasized the need for a large number of characters and De Witt instead emphasized the importance of specificity *within* a character, both saw the primary danger to the American electoral system as a set of overly strict rules that would restrict the aesthetic and political freedom to "follow [their] own." Both tied this lack of freedom to electoral structures – especially a too-small legislature – that would limit the electorate's options for choosing representatives whose own lives and experiences specifically resemble their own. Implicit in the aesthetic logic of Anti-Federalist arguments was the notion that self-determination required localized and individualized license to fashion, expand, alter, and revise the categories through which the people understood themselves, imagined their polity, and evaluated their elected representatives. If, as Brutus argued, members of the national legislature "are the sign" and "the people are the thing signified," then, in order for this sign to signify in a way that was consistent

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<sup>35</sup> "Brutus III," in *Storing*, I, 380.

<sup>36</sup> "John De Witt III," *ibid.*, 27.

with the United States' ideal of self-determination, the people should not be subject to arbitrary, restrictive, or irrelevant frameworks that limited their freedom to represent themselves as they chose. Instead, they should be enabled to decide for themselves which traits to include within the national "portrait" and which character types to include in the set that described the new American polity. To create a system that limited this aesthetic and political freedom, Anti-Federalist writers suggested, would be to fundamentally undermine the notion of electoral self-determination on which the United States was founded.

For Federalists, by contrast, the main threat to the United States' budding self-determination was that such "visionary" aesthetic and political license undermined the American electoral system's ability to produce a coherent and legible representation of the American polity. Federalist arguments rested on the same aesthetic assumptions as those of characteristic writers who feared too much conflicting detail would undermine an individual character's coherence or create chaos within the set of character types through which a people imagined themselves as a polity. For instance, in language reminiscent of eighteenth-century anxiety about the ballooning set of publicly circulating character types, Hamilton argued in the Federalist Papers that "actual representation of all the classes of the people by persons of each class" was absurd:

[U]nless the representative body were to be far more numerous than would be consistent with any idea of regularity or wisdom in its deliberations, it is impossible that what seems to be the spirit of the objection . . . should ever be realized in practice."<sup>37</sup>

By Hamilton's logic, allowing the people too much freedom to determine for themselves which and how many character types to include in the legislature's "portrait" of the polity would actually work against the polity's self-determination. Specifically, it would make the legislature impossibly large and incoherent. Unable to deliberate, that incoherent legislature could represent neither the polity as a whole nor "all those different interests and views" Anti-Federalists sought to include.<sup>38</sup> What the legislature required instead, Hamilton implied, was a limited set of mutually agreed upon representative categories that privileged making the polity comprehensible over including all the new and self-fashioned characters the changing populace had created.

Federalist legislator Noah Webster offered a related critique of unconstrained individual self-determination, both aesthetic and political, through a parable comparing the Constitution to a masterwork of painting or architecture:

A painter, after executing a masterly piece, requested every spectator to draw a pencil over the part that did not please him; but to his surprise, he soon found the *whole piece* defaced. Let every man examine the most perfect building by his *own* taste, and like some microscopic critics, condemn the whole for small deviations from the rules of architecture, and not a part of the *best* constructed fabric would escape. But let *any* man take a *comprehensive view* of the whole, and he will be pleased by the

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<sup>37</sup> "Federalist XXXV" in *The Federalist Papers*, 233.

<sup>38</sup> "Federalist XXXVI," *ibid.*, 236-7.

general beauty and proportions, and admire the structure. The same remarks apply to the new constitution.<sup>39</sup>

Though here Webster discusses the written Constitution rather than the legislature which that Constitution created, his account of how – and how not – to “take a *comprehensive view* of the whole” drew upon the same assumptions as Hamilton’s: both politicians presumed overly democratized aesthetic standards promoted an excessive quantity of detail; and both believed such particularity necessarily undermined the legibility and coherence of the representative whole through which electoral self-determination is effected.

Specifically, in Webster’s analogy, as each spectator follows his personal aesthetic whims and draws over those parts of the painting that do not please him, the whole piece becomes “defaced.” As Webster’s choice of verb suggests, the painting would not merely be vandalized but its “features” or “face” “marr[ed]” or “disfigured” (“deface” v. OED 1.a). In other words, Webster’s metaphor suggests that the Constitution represented a polity akin to a person represented in a written or visual character sketch. Allowing individuals too much license to determine aesthetic standards for themselves, Webster implies, would ensure that the character sketch was not a true representation of the polity’s character. Rather, the representation would be “over-charged” with the sort of excess of extraneous and self-fashioned traits that Walwyn and Warton had critiqued in eighteenth-century character sketches. As Webster’s analogy illustrates, in Federalists’ aesthetic logic, the key threat to Americans’ collective self-determination was individual self-determination. Unconstrained individual self-determination, in which members of the polity were permitted to follow their own political and aesthetic whims regardless of any impact on the “comprehensive view of the whole,” would necessarily lead to excesses of particularization – of detail, self-fashioning, character types, or even elected representatives. This excessive particularization in turn would undermine the cohesiveness of the polity and corrupt the ideal of self-determination on which that polity was founded.

In short, by importing into American politics the representative framework described by critics of the character sketch, Federalists’ and Anti-Federalists brought into early American discourse on electoral representation the same uncertainties regarding likeness’s role in representation that had plagued seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary criticism. As later chapters of this dissertation will show in more detail, this framework for comprehending electoral representation fostered ambiguities and contradictions, which Americans would later negotiate in both literature and politics, regarding how Americans understood what made a representation representative. Chief among these ambiguities during the first decades of the United States: How should Americans balance the need for individual self-determination, essential to liberty, with an electoral system that collectively expressed representations of the polity’s interests and makeup in a coherent and legible manner?

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<sup>39</sup> Noah Webster, *An Examination of the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution Proposed by the Late Convention at Philadelphia, with Answers to the Principle Objections That Have Been Raised Against the System By a Citizen of America* (Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by Prichard & Hall, in Market Street the Second Door Above Laetitia Court, 1787), 51-52.

This question shaped a series of partisan editorial spats that culminated in the “Paper Wars” of the 1810s. Defining this partisan literary culture was a divide over the appropriate degree of aesthetic and democratic freedom in the early United States. Federalist writers and editors, such as William Cobbett and Joseph Dennie, promoted a narrative that portrayed Republican successors to the Anti-Federalists as guilty of both aesthetic and political license. According to Federalists, the disruptive and unchecked self-determination Republicans championed threatened to produce not only the anarchy of the French Revolutionary mob but a democratic corrosion of an aesthetic order essential to the preservation of a coherent society, culture, and polity. Republican publications, by contrast, cast Federalists as overweening purveyors of calcified, excessively British forms that stifled American ingenuity in determining how best to represent themselves, whether in politics or literature.<sup>40</sup> Epitomized by Dennie’s aghast critiques of American “neologisms” (itself an American neologism), these partisan literary squabbles pitted American efforts to determine for themselves how they used the English language against the British linguistic forms and literary norms that had until recently ensured that language’s collective legibility.

Jefferson wrote to Walsh with the anecdote about Franklin and the drafting of the Declaration in 1818, after nearly two decades of witnessing his own political writings become fodder for partisan literary spats. Dennie’s *Port-Folio* repeatedly published literary critiques of Jefferson’s works. These included an extensive critique of the aesthetic license Jefferson took with “neologisms” and metaphors in his “First Inaugural Address,” as well as a discussion in the same issue on the logical and stylistic deficiencies of the Declaration, which had recently become a partisan rallying cry at Republican campaign events.<sup>41</sup> The *Port-Folio* also regularly published derisive comments about those who admired Jefferson’s output. For example, an article in the August 1801 issue declared that “It is one of the most mysterious circumstances in the history of public opinion, that the stile of the Declaration, Notes on Virginia, &c, is viewed as a *model* by many, and pronounced correct by some.”<sup>42</sup> Other Federalist critics took different tacks. For example, in 1811, Federalist critic Thomas Pickering asserted in a letter to Henry Lee that Jefferson was a hack with “little . . . merit” and had merely “compile[d]” the Declaration, not contributed anything original or of literary merit to the

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<sup>40</sup> For an account of the development of this partisan press scene, see Andrew W. Robertson, “‘Look on This Picture... And on This!’ Nationalism, Localism, and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820,”

*The American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (Oct. 2001), especially 1272-75. See also Joseph Eaton, *The Anglo-American Paper War: Debates about the new Republic, 1800-1825* (Basingstoke, Great Britain: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). See also Harold Milton Ellis, “Joseph Dennie and His Circle: A Study in American Literature from 1792 to 1812,” *Studies in English* No. 3 (July 15, 1915): 1-285.

<sup>41</sup> “A Criticism Upon Mr. Jefferson’s Inaugural Speech,” *The Port – Folio* 1.20 (Philadelphia), May 16, 1801: 156; “Politics. Common Sense,” *The Port - Folio* 1, no. 15 (Philadelphia), Apr. 11, 1801: 113. On the partisan reception and political uses of the Declaration in the early United States, see Robert M. S. McDonald, “Thomas Jefferson’s Changing Reputation as Author of the Declaration of Independence: The First Fifty Years,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 169-195.

<sup>42</sup> “To Readers And Correspondents.” *The Port - Folio* 1, no. 34 (Philadelphia), Aug 22, 1801): 271.

founding document.<sup>43</sup> Unifying these Federalist literary critiques, however, was the conviction that no writing produced by a man of Jefferson's democratic politics could be of literary merit.

Jefferson's anecdote about Franklin's remarks during the Declaration's drafting was, at least in part, a riposte to partisan critics of both the Declaration and his literary output more generally. Though the anecdote itself said nothing about the partisan literary environment that formed after the Declaration's signing, its inclusion in a letter to a writer active in that literary scene lent its disparagement of the Continental Congress's overzealous response to the draft's "two or three unlucky expressions" a wider literary import. Particularly pointed was the anecdote's dig at "some Southern gentlemen whose reflections were not yet matured" for having objected to language that had criticized the British king's veto on colonial bans on slave importation. By highlighting the Continental Congressmen's failure to arrive, in 1776, at what, by 1818, was a near-universal condemnation of the international slave trade (banned by the U.S. Congress in 1808), Jefferson's anecdote cast both those legislator-editors and their early-nineteenth-century Federalist counterparts as out of step with America's project of self-determination. Unlike both John Thompson, Hatter, and the American nation as a whole, these critics, Jefferson's anecdote implies, had not fully undergone an Enlightenment "emergence from self-incurred immaturity." Consequently, their edits, like the pedantic criticisms of Jefferson's language by the Federalist Dennie, necessarily undermined the project of American self-determination.

However, even as the anecdote poked fun at the partisan critics who nitpicked Jefferson's language, it also teased out an unsettling problem with American representation: namely that self-determination and stable, widely comprehensible representation always worked at cross purposes. Like the efforts of eighteenth-century writers of character sketches to contain and make manageable an expanding set of character types, John Thompson's friends repeatedly ran up against aesthetic questions about what was and was not an essential trait as they edited his sign's inscription, "John Thompson, *Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money.*" First, they deemed the title "Hatter . . . tautologous" because the phrase "makes hats" alone was enough to establish his character as a hatter. Then they judged both the word "makes" and the phrase "for ready money" extraneous as well – the first because "his customers would not care who made the hats" and the second because "it was not the custom of the place to sell on credit." Finally, they excised the word "sells" since, as one friend put it, "nobody will expect you to give them away." Read outside the anecdote's historical context, these edits seem to clarify Thompson's character in much the way the literary criticism of Gally, Walwyn, and other eighteenth-century theorists of the character sketch called for; inessential and potentially distorting details are pared away to leave merely the name John Thompson "with the figure of a hat subjoined."

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Pickering to Henry Lee, May 13, 1811, quoted in Julian P. Boyd and Gerard W. Gewalt, eds., *The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of a Text* (Charlottesville: International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello in association with the Library of Congress, 1999), 13.

Yet reintroducing that historical context – of the anecdote’s early-eighteenth-century setting, Franklin’s Revolutionary-era telling, and Jefferson’s early-nineteenth-century transmission of the anecdote into American literary culture – complicates such an assessment. For instance, the sign’s specification that Thompson sells hats “for ready money” likely would have been “useless” in early eighteenth-century New England, as Thompson’s friends insisted. However, the increasingly complex economy of the later eighteenth century, in which merchants and colonial governments relied ever more on credit and paper money rather than specie, would have made such specification necessary by the time of the Revolution. Moreover, by the time Jefferson sent the anecdote to Walsh in 1818, when the United States suffered an economic depression caused by the bursting of its first major credit bubble, credit – along with the banking system that enabled it – had emerged as a contentious political issue.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, while in the early eighteenth-century customers might not have cared who made the hats they bought, during the build-up to the Revolution, the question of whether or not a seller of hats like Thompson made his wares had become a hot-button issue. The oppressive British mercantile and tax policies, such as the 1732 Hat Act forbidding American hatters from making hats with American furs, was a colonial injustice recalled when, during the Revolutionary War, Franklin famously wore an American-style hat made from American pine marten fur at the French court in 1776.<sup>45</sup> Situating the anecdote of Thompson’s sign within this changing social and political context highlights the ways the distinction between essential and extraneous traits was far less stable or self-evident than the friends who whittled Thompson’s sign down to “the figure of a hat” presumed.

Rereading Jefferson’s anecdote about John Thompson, hatter, with attention to this changing context reveals how efforts to clarify representation often conflicted with the impulse toward self-determination that had driven Thomson to make the sign in the first place. Thompson’s friends’ decisions concerning what qualified as redundant – that, for instance, no one would care whether Thompson actually *made* the hats himself, or that *everyone* would assume Thompson did not work for credit – enforced a restricting social consensus. Their edits imply a limited notion of what qualifies one as a hatter (clearly only the selling here, since the making is deemed extraneous) and what the hatter’s role in the community was. In advocating for these excisions, Thompson’s friends drew on shared assumptions about the characters of hatters and tradesmen more generally. These assumptions allowed the character types – or “social persons,” to use Fowler’s term – of apprentices, journeymen, and artisans to be accorded meaningful places within the colonial polity. But they did so at the cost of reinforcing a social, economic, and political system that restricted those tradesmen’s opportunities for self-determination in ways that at the time had seemed natural but that a century of historical change had shown to be arbitrary.

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<sup>44</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992), 141; Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 202-216.

<sup>45</sup> Laura Rigal, “Benjamin Franklin, the Science of Flow, and the Legacy of Enlightenment,” in *A Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. by David Waldstreicher (New York: WileyBlackwell, 2011), 330-332.



Thompson could choose to reject this framework and instead attempt to fashion a new way of being a hatter – say, by allowing purchases on credit or making the craftsmanship of his own wares a selling point. Yet, if he exercised such self-determination, Thompson would face a paradox: an attempt on Thompson’s part to determine for himself how he would conduct his trade necessarily disrupted the social and aesthetic framework through which Thompson’s character as a hatter became meaningful to the wider community and polity. As such, the more Thompson’s emergence into adulthood did not merely repeat the choices of other former apprentices but actually expanded the possibilities of the course of his own life, the less widely comprehensible the meaning of that self-determination would become. The only exception would be if other hatters followed a similar path toward self-determination, in which case the polity might collectively ascribe meaning to either a revised hatter character type or a new character type appropriate to Thompson’s self-fashioned social role. In that case, though, that new consensus would become equally limiting to those who sought to fashion truly self-determined characters for themselves without following the previously new, soon-to-be-outdated, mold of the hatter.

At stake in this dramatization of the tension between self-determination and legible representation was whether the self-determination that the Declaration proclaimed could ever achieve the self-evidence that document seemed to promise. Jefferson’s anecdote about Franklin, the Declaration, and John Thompson, Hatter, implied a need to rethink whether American representation, either literary or electoral, could, even theoretically, aspire to the natural relationship between the sign and the thing signified that Brutus and others had called for. As Jay Fliegelman argues, the Declaration was a product of an elocutionary culture that sought to replace “artificial language,” whose meaning “is affixed . . . by compact and agreement,” with “natural language” whose “modulations every man understands by the principles of his nature.” This natural language “would be a corollary to natural law” in that it “would permit universal recognition and understanding” of Enlightenment principles – like that of self-determination.<sup>46</sup> However, as Jefferson’s anecdote showed, self-determination’s very disruptiveness to the collection of character types through which a people understood themselves and their polity unsettled the idea that any such set of characters might be natural and universal. Consequently, following through on the Declaration’s Enlightenment promise of self-determination would not only require giving up the extant set of constituent characters through which colonists had once conceived themselves but also entail accepting that no new stable and universal set would be found or realized.

Nowhere did the anecdote make this sense of contingency more palpable than in its engagement with signage itself. The edits that reduce Thompson’s textual self-description to a picture of a hat aspire to natural language. They suggest Thompson’s social and economic role – and his place within the polity – might be encapsulated by a single pictorial character that required no literacy, nor even knowledge of any particular spoken language, to comprehend. In doing so, those edits invoke an ideal of natural language in which there is no meaningful distinction between sign and signified.

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<sup>46</sup> Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*, 44-45, 2.

However, the awkward conjoining of the picture of a hat to Thompson's name underscored that, if such a language had ever existed, it could no longer be found in the age that had embraced self-determination, even tentatively. After all, Thompson was not himself a hat. The "figure of a hat" was itself a contingent linguistic character, albeit a hieroglyphic one; and Thompson's shop sign was not a natural sign but a representation.

Moreover, hieroglyphs like Thompson's "figure of a hat" had found meaning as part of a specific signage tradition that Jefferson and many of his contemporaries would have been passingly familiar with through their travels in Britain. This tradition had originally included elements that approached natural language, such actual tools of artisans' trades, including planes, kettles, or even hat molds. Through such objects, signs invoked the natural order of an organic medieval polity constituted from a stable set of typed social persons. However, the painted icons that superseded these three dimensional artifacts had for centuries allowed for a far wider range of meaning than Thompson's editors seem to register. For example, shop signs often punned visually on the trader's name, with "a horse fording a stream for Horsford or two or three cocks for Cox." And tradesmen often combined the signs of their former masters or the former renters of their premises with their own, even when those signs had nothing to do with their own name or trade.<sup>47</sup> As such, even within the system of meaning generated by a transatlantic discourse of character in which men were known and labeled by occupational category, the figure of the hat could never have been taken as a perfectly natural sign for hatters or for Thompson himself. Rather, the hat on Thompson's sign would meaningfully represent him only as part of a negotiated representative framework in which the "Golden Hat, Hat and Feathers, the Gold laced Hat and the Hat and Beaver" were "all typical of the signs of the Hatters."<sup>48</sup>

As such, in dwelling on signs and representation, Jefferson's anecdote did not merely repeat partisan efforts to affirm one party's aesthetic framework as true, natural, and universal but rather troubled any contention that held that either party's political aesthetics made it the one true heir to America's Revolutionary principles. The anecdote did so through its figurations that echoed both constitutional debates about how legislatures and elected representatives were akin to signs, and the transatlantic discourse on character aesthetics that provided those debates' structure. In doing so, Jefferson's anecdote showed how the very idea of self-determined representative government was premised on an unstable theoretical foundation. The desire for open-ended self-determination and the need to represent the results of that self-determination would always undermine each other. Put another way, in contrast to the assurance of self-evidence central to the Declaration itself, the anecdote offered a vision of representation as contingent – one whose portrait of the polity always threatened to fragment into an incoherent, uncontainable, and ever-proliferating set of constituent parts. The anecdote's return – through John Thompson's sign, to Brutus's account of electoral signification and the theories of character aesthetics on which it was premised – raised serious doubts

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Treu, *Signs, streets, and storefronts: a history of architecture and graphics along America's commercial corridors* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 18; Cecil Meadows, *Trade Signs and Their Origins* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1957), 2-3.

<sup>48</sup> Meadows, *Trade Signs*, 60.

about whether Americans might ever develop forms of representation that fully realized the ideal of self-determination on which the country was founded.

## Chapter 2: Virtue, Franklin's Virtual Representation, and Self-Determination at a Distance

Though most obviously about signs, Jefferson's anecdote is also about hats – specifically, Franklin and hats. At the 1818 moment of its writing, it necessarily recalled the image of Franklin in a pine marten hat that was ubiquitous in American print and material cultures (Figure 1). This image featured Franklin as he appeared during the Revolutionary War in Louis XIV's French Court: bespectacled and aging, wearing a plain, American-style coat, his hair hidden by a round, bushy fur hat. The disarming, rustic garb was essential to Franklin's success as a rebel diplomat. Wearing it helped him charm the French aristocracy, who valorized his American wit and self-taught intelligence. Largely as a result of this rapport, Franklin was able to secure French financial and military assistance for the Americans' fight for independence from the British. After his death, this image of Parisian "frontier Franklin" became an icon and a marketing juggernaut. Circulating on everything from bowls to handkerchiefs, as well as appearing in numerous cartoons, portraits, and "characters," this Franklin graced the mantles and captured the imaginations of the first generation born within the nation Franklin's sartorial diplomacy helped found.<sup>49</sup>

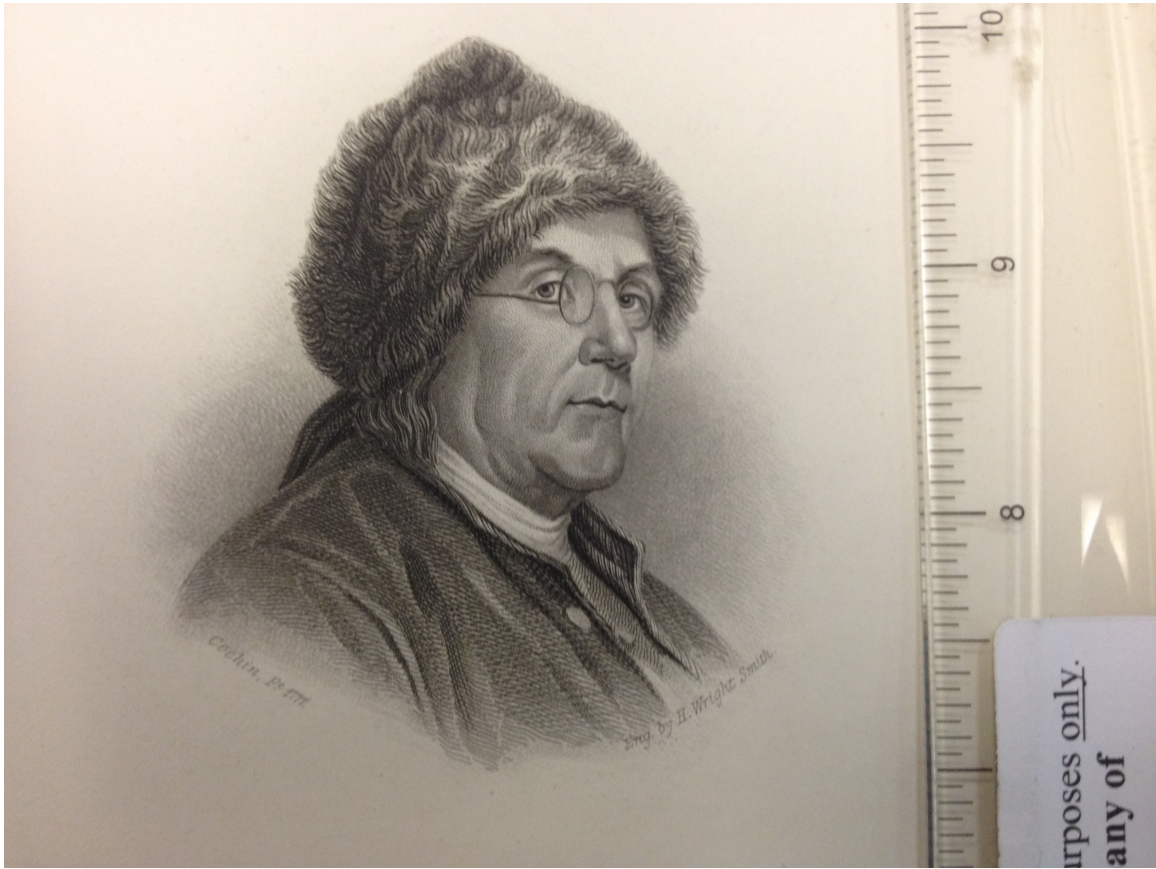
This image of "frontier Franklin" thoroughly fused Americans' collective narrative of political self-determination to Franklin's personal transformation from runaway apprentice to wealthy merchant, then from ambitious British officeholder to American rebel, and finally to ambassador for a newly independent United States. In choosing to don the hat rather than dress in court style, the wealthy and urbane Franklin performatively flouted the French aristocracy's sartorial norms and social categories, establishing himself as an insouciant and original American genius who could move freely among the French elite even as he refused to kowtow to the rigid and hierarchical social structure of the French court. The hat also asserted Americans' political right, in defiance of Britain's king and Parliament, to determine for themselves how they gathered, sold, and made goods from American natural resources like pine marten fur.<sup>50</sup> The marten hat, in other words, yoked the individual self-determination Franklin embodied, both sartorially and through his public career, to the collective self-determination of the American people on whose behalf Franklin advocated. Unsurprisingly, this Revolutionary Franklin in his marten hat would later become a key facet of a nineteenth- and twentieth-century mythology that cast the printer, inventor, successful businessman, politician, and Founding Father as both a symbol of Americans' political self-determination and the consummate self-made American man.

However, both in life and during the three decades following Franklin's death in 1790, this characterization of Franklin contested another set of depictions of Franklin as duplicitous and self-serving. Versions of this alternate character circulated on both sides

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<sup>49</sup> For more on Franklin's descriptions of his pine marten hat and his sartorial diplomacy, see Megan Walsh, "Benjamin Franklin's Material Cultures," in *A Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. David Waldstreicher (New York: Wiley-Blackwell 2011): 421-423; and Rigal, "Benjamin Franklin, the Science of Flow, and the Legacy of the Enlightenment," 328-333.

<sup>50</sup> See Rigal, "Benjamin Franklin, the Science of Flow, and the Legacy of the Enlightenment," 308-334.



**Figure 1: Engraving of Benjamin Franklin in a pine marten hat by H. G. Wright, c. 1850. After a drawing by Charles-Nicolas Cochin, c. 1777. Courtesy, Library Company of Philadelphia.**

of the Atlantic and was propagated not only by disgruntled British loyalists but also by American elites who had supported the Revolution but nevertheless saw in Franklin a threat to their social station and political power. In these portrayals, Franklin never acts out of concern for moral virtue or collective good but rather only out of his own self-interest, which is driven by money, prestige, and class. His central life goal is to gain an office or title and ruthlessly ascend the ranks of London society. Only when an indifferent ministry and British prejudice against men of low birth thwarted that ambition does this Franklin convert to the cause of American independence – and then he does so with vengeful and two-faced alacrity.<sup>51</sup> For these works, images of Franklin in his pine

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<sup>51</sup> For more on Franklin’s contentious posthumous reception, see Nian-Sheng Huang, *Benjamin Franklin in American Thought and Culture, 1790-1990* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994), 25-35; and Keith Arbour, “Benjamin Franklin as Weird Sister: William Cobbett and Federalist Philadelphia’s Fears of Democracy,” in *Federalists Reconsidered*, Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg, eds. (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 1998), 179-198.

marten hat symbolized, not the triumph of American self-determination, but rather Franklin's personal duplicitousness and American degeneracy more broadly.<sup>52</sup>

Key to such accounts was the conviction that Franklin distilled the dangers of unconstrained self-determination. Loyalists often blamed Franklin's "Pervers[e] . . . Genius" for the American Revolution and argued, as Peter Oliver did, that Franklin's propensity for "plung[ing] society into . . . Mischiefs" was evident in a "Character . . . calculated to set a whole Kingdom in Flame."<sup>53</sup> Frequently, critics linked Franklin's capacity for instantiating political chaos to the disruption his self-determined rise produced within the traditional framework through which Britons understood one another and their polity. As one bitter loyalist put it in "Thoughts on the Character of Dr. Franklin," Franklin's mercenary and duplicitous efforts to "exalt himself from the situation of a Journeyman Printer to that of a Provincial Agent, a Postmaster General, and an Envoy" epitomized the "anarchy" unleashed by "the Congress of America, or the National Assembly of France." Moreover, Franklin's propensity for anarchic self-determination was not limited to Franklin as an individual. Rather, thanks to his example, "an host of future Franklins" threatened to "dissolve the bonds of society" throughout the Atlantic world.<sup>54</sup> In short, for such writers – including Americans mistrustful of the social and political change the Revolution had unleashed – Franklin's character distilled the danger explored in Jefferson's anecdote about John Thompson, hatter: namely, that unconstrained and self-interested self-determination could transform Enlightenment promise into political chaos and conflagration. As one widely circulated poem summed it up, referencing the clean-burning stove with an inverted flame that Franklin invented:

But to covet political fame  
Was in him a degrading ambition;  
A spark which from Lucifer came,  
And kindled the blaze of sedition.

Let candour, then, write on his URN,  
"Here lies the renown inventor;  
"Whose flame to the skies ought to burn,

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<sup>52</sup> These narratives often linked Franklin's duplicitous and America's degeneracy to the frontier. In doing so, they typically focused on Franklin's writings about America's western lands and, especially, on his pre-Revolutionary efforts to secure royal support for an inland colony called "Vandalia," from which he stood to profit immensely. See, for example James Jones Wilmer, *Memoirs of the Late Dr. Benjamin Franklin: With a Review of His Pamphlet Entitled "Information to Those Who Would Wish to Remove to America"* (London: printed and sold for the author by A. Grant, 1790), 72. There Wilmer charges that one of Franklin's many perfidious acts was to grossly deceive potential settlers in his famous essay. According to Wilmer, the frontier was not, as "Information to Those Who Would Wish to Remove" suggested, place where a poor but industrious man might establish himself and thrive but rather a permanently uncivilized, westward-moving zone where louts who have "outlived [their] credit, or fortune, in the cultivated parts of the state" routinely flee.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Oliver, *Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion: a Tory View*, Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 78.

<sup>54</sup> An Englishman Who Loves His Country, pseud., "Thoughts on the Character of Dr. Franklin," *Gentleman's Magazine* 61, no. 1 (May 1791): 413-14.

“But, inverted, descends to the centre.”<sup>55</sup>

To date, literary critics and historians have generally treated this bifurcated reception of Franklin separately from textual analysis of his *Memoirs*, which was composed and posthumously edited during the decades when the split over his reception was at its most contentious.<sup>56</sup> The result has been a striking disconnection between critical engagement with *Memoirs*' political project and biographical accounts of the realities of Franklin's involvement in American politics, before, during, and after the Revolution. The former focuses primarily on how *Memoirs* adapts the exemplum or conduct book to the project of forming a new, independent American polity and casts Franklin's life as a model for how new American citizens might cultivate the independent-minded virtue key to the preservation of the fledgling American Republic.<sup>57</sup> However, these examinations do little to connect this account of Franklin to the specifics of his political activities or deeply divided public reception. Biographical accounts, by contrast, emphasize the complexities of Franklin's decades-long political career, in which Franklin played both sides not only of the split between colonists and Britain but also of the widening divide between, what Gordon Wood calls, the old “monarchical” social order and the new “democratic” one.<sup>58</sup> These accounts suggest how Franklin's contentious reception likely followed from the complicated realities of his political career, but they do little to situate *Memoirs*' literary construction of Franklin's persona within this lived political context.

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<sup>55</sup> “Inscription on the chamber stove in the shape of an urn, invented by Dr. Franklin, and so contrived that the flame, instead of ascending, descended,” *The London Magazine, Or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* 52, 1783: 233. This poem was widely reprinted by those who sought to attack Franklin's character before and after his death. See, for example, Wilmer, *Memoirs of the Late Dr. Benjamin Franklin*; Jonathan Boucher, “Discourse X. On the Character of Ahitophel” and “Appending to the Two Sermons on Absalom and Ahitophel,” in *From A view of the causes and consequences of the American revolution; in thirteen discourses, preached in North America between the years 1763 and 1775: with an historical preface* (London: printed for G.G. and J. Robinson, Paternoster-Row, 1797), 402-449.

<sup>56</sup> Franklin began writing his *Memoirs* in 1771 and, after a break during the American Revolution, continued work on the manuscript until his death in 1790. During and after the Revolution, his reception both in Britain and the United States was deeply divided. These divisions peaked in the 1780s and 90s and persisted well into the 1820s.

<sup>57</sup> For an account of the history of this literary criticism, see Ormond Seavey, “‘The Manners and Situation of a Rising People’: Reading Franklin's *Autobiography*,” in *A Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. David Waldstreicher (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 264-68.

<sup>58</sup> The accounts these biographies give of Franklin's politics vary widely. Some, such as Verner W. Crane's *Benjamin Franklin and a Rising People* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1954) largely recapitulate the popular narrative that fuses Franklin's individual narrative with that of American independence. More recently, scholarly biographies have emphasized the ways in which Franklin's individual politics deviated from that narrative, though they have not reached a consensus on what those politics were. For instance, Douglas Anderson's *The Radical Enlightenment of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) emphasizes the importance of Franklin's youthful radical thought to his political development, while Gordon Wood's *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin 2004) highlights the ways in which Franklin worked within, rather than rebelled from, a hierarchical colonial political structure premised on deference and dependence.

This chapter bridges this disciplinary divide between scholarship on Franklin's political career, his literary self-fashioning, and his public reception by attending to an overlooked link between his political activities and the politics of his *Memoirs*: the doctrine of virtual representation. The electoral doctrine of virtual representation, which held that even though MPs were elected from specific districts in Britain they nevertheless represented the interests of all citizens of the British empire, was a crucial but unstable nexus between Franklin's individual political ambition and his role in the American Revolution and its aftermath. In the years leading up to the Revolution, frustrated colonists had railed against the inadequacies of their virtual representation in Britain's Parliament, which they famously pilloried with the rallying cry, "No taxation without representation." However, virtual representation was also key to Franklin's self-determined rise within the British Empire. During the bulk of his pre-Revolutionary political career, Franklin served not as an elected legislator who voted directly on bills that affected his constituents. Rather he acted as a non-voting colonial representative who advocated for colonists' interests behind the scenes or as an official of the Crown charged with carrying out the American policies created by MPs elected in Britain. Consequently, as he worked on his *Memoirs* during the years surrounding the Revolution, Franklin faced the difficult task of reconciling his own complicity with the virtual representation that was increasingly anathema to his American countrymen.

Moreover, Franklin's attempt at reconciling his complicity against American ideals occurred at a moment when virtual representation continually threatened to reemerge in American electoral politics, undermining the self-determination the Revolution promised. This threat was especially potent along the United States' western frontier. Though only rarely named as such, Americans registered the specter of virtual representation, not only in the Constitution's reorganization of legislative representation and the eastern political elite's concomitant reassertion of political and economic power, but also in efforts by the Continental Congress to limit the spontaneous formation of new states west of the Appalachians. In fact, much of American politics during the first three decades after the Revolution centered around contests between those who believed such restriction and consolidation were necessary to stabilize and make representable the new American polity and those who instead regarded such moves as betrayals of the Revolution's fight for electoral self-determination. Entailed in these contests were unresolved questions about what constituted adequate electoral representation, especially raising questions, such as: What limits needed to be placed on individual and local self-determination in order to ensure the American electoral system's stability and coherence? and How distant, aesthetically and geographically, could a representation be from what it represented before it ceased to be representative at all?

This chapter argues that Franklin's *Memoirs* engages these questions about electoral representation through its portrayal of Franklin's virtue, which underscores the impossibility of distinguishing between a truly virtuous character and one whose virtue is only virtual because it is performed out of self-interest. Such virtual virtue, the chapter shows, allows for a way of imagining character that renders moot many of the unanswered aesthetic and political questions about how to represent a self-determined polity that had vexed both eighteenth-century critics of the character sketch and



participants in the Constitutional Debates. It does so by performatively removing the tension explored in Chapter 1 – between individual and collective self-determination – and, as a result, collapsing any meaningful distinction between direct and virtual electoral representation.

From the mid-nineteenth century on, popular accounts of Franklin have cast him as a paragon of individual self-making and self-determination. Simone Ide's 1826 edition of Franklin's *Way to Wealth and Advice to a Young Tradesman* urged young American men to look to Franklin as an example of what "resolute determination" could accomplish regardless of whether or not there were "advantages in [a man's] favor."<sup>59</sup> And, by the 1830s, young clerks were devouring Franklin's *Memoirs*, emulating his system for improving one's habits and character, and attending Boston's Franklin lectures, which celebrated Franklin's success as a model for young "men of humble origin, narrow fortunes, and small advantages."<sup>60</sup> Persisting throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this popular representation of Franklin embraced a vision of class mobility powered by young men's determination to shape their own characters morally, socially, and economically. In depicting Franklin as the natural template for these young businessmen, this popular account of Franklin's life and works framed such individual self-determination as an uncomplicated good, both for those men who strove for it and for the nation that they, following in Franklin's footsteps, would help shape.

However, Franklin's *Memoirs*, set down in the years immediately surrounding the American Revolution, give a much more fraught account of how self-determination shaped his character than his *Memoirs*' nineteenth- and twentieth-century reception acknowledged. Take, for example, the passage in which Franklin describes how his family came to have its surname:

The Notes one of my Uncles (who had the same kind of Curiosity in collecting Family Anecdotes) once put into my Hands, furnished me with several Particulars relating to our Ancestors. From these Notes I learned that the Family had liv'd in the same village, Ecton, in Northamptonshire, for 300 years, & how much longer he knew not (perhaps from the Time when the name *Franklin*, that before was the Name of an Order of People, was assumed by them as a Surname when others took Surnames all over the Kingdom. –(Here a Note), on a Freehold of about 30 Acres, aided by the Smith's Business, which had continued in the Family till his Time, the eldest son being always bred to that Business. A Custom which he & my father followed as to their eldest Sons. When I search'd the registers at Ecton, I found an account of their Births, Marriages and Burials from the Year 1555 only, there being no Register kept in that Parish at any time preceding. By that

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Irvin G. Wyllie, *The self-made man in America: the myth of rags to riches* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 14.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Everett, "Inaugural Franklin Lecture," quoted in Wyllie, *The self-made man*, 14. On clerks emulating Franklin's moral system, see Thomas Augst's *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 43, 56-61.

register I perceived that I was the youngest Son of the youngest Son for 5 Generations back.<sup>61</sup>

Taken out of context, Franklin's line about being was "the youngest Son of the youngest Son for 5 Generations back" seems to cast Franklin as *sui generis*. It emphasizes his profound lack of inheritance, either in the form of property or of the social capital that is passed down from the father to the eldest son who takes his place in the social order. For good or for ill, the line suggests, Franklin and his five forebears had no choice but to determine their own courses in life.

However, this reading elides what is in fact a complex and fraught depiction of Franklin's relationship to the village in Northamptonshire where his family had lived for at least "300 years." As Franklin notes, the village of Ecton was likely the place where his family first acquired the surname "*Franklin*, that before was the Name of and Order of People." It was also the site on which his family, building upon their "freehold of 30 acres," established themselves as a line of smiths, into which they "bred" each generation's eldest son. Ecton, in other words, links Franklin both to Britain and to a mode of imagining the polity as set of "orders" or character types. Only in contrast to this established order does the self-determination encapsulated by the passage's final line become legible. Franklin is self-made because he is neither a Franklin nor a smith, nor is he bound by an inheritance that, were he an eldest son, would have included not only British property and a profession but also an investment in understanding persons and polity through such orders. Taken as a whole, then, the passage casts Franklin's self-determination as, paradoxically, embedded within the established order it ostensibly rejects.

Moreover, the passage's very existence depends upon Franklin's willingness to move and work within that order. Though he does not say so explicitly here, he could visit Ecton and write Part One of his *Memoirs* at Twyford, at the Bishop of St. Asaph's, because he had been in Britain for the previous six years acting as agent for multiple colonies, including, most recently, Massachusetts. Even though Franklin's tenuous foothold in the society and politics of Britain proper was an endless source of anxiety and frustration, it was nevertheless a testament to Franklin's ambition and success within imperial Britain's political hierarchy. He rose from apprentice to businessman to Postmaster General with the help of patrons who themselves held imperial offices, and recent biographers, such as Gordon Wood, have argued that he arrived in Britain with the hope of continuing that rise within Britain proper.<sup>62</sup> In short, Franklin's account of his self-determination was made possible by the fact that he thrived remarkably well within the very order his self-determination also challenged – so well, in fact, that he had risen to a position of influence and reasonably hoped to climb within the world of London politics.

Attention to self-determination's relationship to the context that enables it extends throughout *Memoirs*, which offers not an unconstrained celebration of Franklin's self-

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<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Second Edition, Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-6.

<sup>62</sup> See Wood, *Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 61-104.

determination but rather a fraught meditation on how far self-determination can go while still remaining legible. A passage on Franklin's uncle and namesake makes this problem of legibility explicit. According to the passage, the elder Benjamin "was an ingenious man." "[B]red a Silk Dyer," this uncle authored poetry as well as aspired to politics, "too much perhaps for his station," notes Franklin, who goes on to describe how his own early exposure to politics came from his uncle's "Pamphlets relating to Publick Affairs." Juxtaposed with descriptions of the elder Benjamin's aspirations toward personal and political self-determination is an account of how this uncle "form'd a Shorthand of his own." Franklin goes on to explain that, while his uncle taught him the short hand, he, "never practising it [,] ha[d] now forgot it." As a result, he could no longer read any of the notes his uncle had written in it.<sup>63</sup>

Through this depiction of his uncle, Franklin stages the tension between individual self-determination and collective legibility that permeated Revolutionary-era debates about how to electorally represent the American polity. In both his politics and his writing, the elder Franklin's urge toward self-determination ends up pitted against that self-determination's illegibility to others – literally so in the case of the shorthand, whose characters no one can read because, unlike the shorthands of the era that were widely taught and shared, the elder Franklin had created it wholly on his own. Not only had this will to radical self-determination failed to produce a viable political career, but also every bit of original genius written in the elder Franklin's self-forged shorthand was now lost, even to the nephew that had inherited his name and aspirations. These abortive efforts at self-determination underscore the dangers of disrupting too greatly the set of characters through which a people represent themselves, whether those that make up the alphabet or those that comprise a polity in which politics is recognized as too ambitious for a Silk Dyer's "station." If such a disruption were too extreme, the passage reminds readers, it would undermine the very self-determination it strove to enact by rendering that self-determination illegible to anyone else and thus impossible to translate to the polity as a collective.

Together with the account of Franklin's family roots in Ecton, *Memoirs'* depiction of his uncle begs a question central to Revolutionary-era electoral politics: what degree of self-determination was sufficient without being excessive? Animating this question was a tension between Americans' desire to fully throw off the British rule and its corruptions, and their fear that too much Revolutionary change to the established order would drive their ability to represent their new polity into chaos. Colonists had for decades agitated against and then fought a war to escape a British system whose rigid social order they increasingly resented, with its limits on electoral self-determination that had left them without meaningful electoral representation in the legislative body governing large swaths of their individual and collective lives. Yet, even as Americans were eager to throw off this old order's stifling norms and political corruptions – especially anything that smacked of the odious doctrine of virtual representation – they faced the challenge, discussed in the previous chapter, of representing their newly won self-determination in a way that made their polity legible to its members. How, then, could Americans ensure

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<sup>63</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 48-49.

their system of electoral representation embraced self-determination sufficiently, so as not to recreate the evils of a British system that offered electoral representation in name only, but nevertheless reigned in the excesses of particularity that had rendered the elder Benjamin's shorthand illegible to his countrymen and descendants?

These questions were central to Franklin's work in his *Memoirs* because he could not celebrate his own successes at self-determination, whether individual or collective, without acknowledging his work within a political system dependent on virtual representation. In fact, his *Memoirs* as he planned them are devoted, in large part, to recounting that work. The published version extensively details his appointed role overseeing colonial defense, and its unfinished narrative breaks off just as he commences his extensively outlined account of his time as colonial agent in London. Moreover, even when *Memoirs*' describes his election to the Pennsylvania Assembly – ostensibly a role exemplifying direct electoral representation – it emphasizes how Franklin avoided aligning himself with a particular party or constituency and instead attempted to act on behalf of the whole of Pennsylvania. While none of these roles precisely mirrored that of a British MPs' relationship to the American colonists, all amounted to virtual representation in the crucial sense that Franklin acted on behalf of colonists who did not and could not vote for him – and this was made possible always within institutional structures created by or complicit with British virtual representation. Indeed, *Memoirs* unabashedly celebrates Franklin's fulfillment of these roles, making Franklin's roles as virtual representative central to its portrayal of Franklin's personal and public-works success and its celebration of Franklin's life.

However, that work had a vexed relationship to the revolution which Franklin had championed and to the electoral system he and his compatriots sought to found in the United States. Even within Britain, for decades before Franklin arrived in London, there had been debate about whether virtual representation was viable in reality or merely a comforting fantasy.<sup>64</sup> Of particular concern for many was the fact that faith in virtual representation justified a lack of action on “rotten boroughs,” a districting phenomenon that, as Locke put it, allowed some localities – that had only “the bare name of town” – to elect MPs even as “whole count[ies] numerous in people” went without direct representation.<sup>65</sup> Because the populations of these legacy electoral districts were so low, rich candidates could effectively bribe the entire electorate, buying their way into parliamentary office. Consequently, as Franklin put it to his son William during the 1768 Stamp Act crisis, “this whole venal nation is now at market, will be sold for about two millions, and might be bought out of the hands of the present bidders (if he would offer half a million more) by the Devil himself.”<sup>66</sup> In short, even as virtual representation provided the logic for allowing a parliament elected on the British Isle to represent an empire that spanned the globe, it was seen on both sides of the Atlantic as an invitation to electoral corruption.

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<sup>64</sup> See Reid, *Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution*, 43-76.

<sup>65</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 170.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, March 13, 1768.

Americans frustrated with the legislation Parliament had passed to tax them and regulate their trade added a second critique of virtual representation: Parliament was simply too distant and disconnected from the colonies to adequately represent American interests. Franklin suggested as much in his letter to William when he lamented that the distinction between justly imposed duties, intended to regulate colonial trade, and unjustly imposed duties, intended to raise revenue, “will amount to little” if “the Parliament is to be the judge.” Franklin, like colonists more generally, was divided on how to fix this situation. Early on in his political career he made the case that, “by allowing [the colonies] *representatives in Parliament*” and thus “*uniting the colonies* more intimately with Great Britain,” they might have their interests sufficiently well represented even without “so many representatives . . . as to have any great weight by their numbers.”<sup>67</sup> By 1770, however, he had concluded that even if the colonies *were* allowed to send elected representatives, Parliament was simply too distant, geographically and politically, to adequately represent the colonies’ interests.<sup>68</sup> Uniting Franklin’s earlier and later writings on colonial representation in Parliament was an unresolved question: How could a legislature whose members primarily came from a central population represent distant and disparate locales?

This question persisted after the Revolution, as Americans confronted the specter of virtual representation’s reemergence in debates about how to constitute an electoral system that could adequately represent the United States’ diverse and geographically dispersed polity. Most often, this uncertainty manifested as anxiety about how the interests of minority states, especially sparsely populated states on the frontier, would be protected. For instance, during the Virginia Ratifying Convention, Patrick Henry expressed concern that a Federalist legislature weighted toward Eastern interests could too easily alter land policy in ways that harmed the western states – for example by relinquishing the Mississippi River to the Spanish without securing navigation rights for Ohio Valley farmers transporting their goods to market. “If a bare majority of Congress can make laws [under the new Constitution],” Henry warned, “the situation of our western citizens is dreadful.”<sup>69</sup> In other cases, Anti-Federalists made concern about the return of virtual representation explicit. For example, Cato argued that allowing governors “the unprecedented power” of appointing “temporary senators in the case of vacancies” set a troubling “precedent for virtual representation” and that, even more troubling, if such senators were “to be chosen by the legislatures of the different states . . . their original appointment [would be] virtual” as well.<sup>70</sup> Unifying these strands of thought was fear that distance, whether geographical or political, between representatives

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> In 1770, Franklin wrote in a letter to Samuel Cooper: “Expressions such as ‘the Supreme Authority of Parliament,’ ‘the Subordinancy of our Assemblies to Parliament,’ and the like . . . are too strong for Compliment, and tend to confirm a Claim of Subjects in one Part of the King’s Dominions to be Sovereigns in over their Fellow Subjects in another Part of his Dominions, when in truth they have no such Right and their Claim is founded only in Usurpation,” Benjamin to Samuel Cooper, June, 18, 1770.

<sup>69</sup> Patrick Henry, “Speech to Virginia Ratifying Convention,” June 9, 1788.

<sup>70</sup> Cato, “Letter V,” *The New-York Journal*, November 22, 1787.

and those they represented would recreate the ills and corruption of the virtual representation against which colonists had rebelled.

Underpinning this fear was Enlightenment political theory, colonial experience, and post-Revolutionary governing difficulties that all raised doubts about how electoral representation could bridge geographic and political distance without overly limiting self-determination. Colonists' revolutionary break with Britain seemed to confirm Montesquieu's warning that "It is natural for a republic to have only a small territory; otherwise it cannot long subsist."<sup>71</sup> Too much geographical variation, argued Montesquieu, Hume, and many other Enlightenment political philosophers, produced too great a variation within the polity and made sustaining a government that adequately represented the interests of all impossible. Yet, as the Continental Congress's struggle to govern a fractious and dispersed American Republic highlighted, arriving at a sustainable U.S. electoral system necessitated finding a way to meaningfully represent American self-determination across geographic and political distances. Making this problem especially urgent were the particular difficulties entailed in electorally representing the frontier. In order to ensure a stable national government, the United States drastically limited the creation of new states, meaning that residents of sparsely populated western frontiers were often contained within the same state and thus represented by the same congressional delegates and state legislatures as wealthier and denser eastern population centers. Often times, frontier residents, frustrated by their inability to get their interests represented through such a system, responded by attempting to form new, smaller states, many of which sent petitions to Congress asking for recognition of their right to self-determination and admission to the United States.<sup>72</sup>

The "Lost State of Franklin" was a particularly striking example of how geographic and political distance factored into this tension between self-determination and coherent national electoral representation. Between 1784 and 1788, a coalition of landed elite, yeoman farmers, and backcountry merchants tried and failed to establish this new state, whose proposed territory was then claimed by North Carolina and is now part of Tennessee. Motivating this attempt, which historian Kevin T. Barkesdale characterizes as "the first succession," was the "perceived unresponsiveness" of the electoral system, which at the time heavily weighted eastern districts dominated by wealthy planters, "to the demands made by backcountry farmers, stockmen, merchants, and land speculators for state funds for internal improvements."<sup>73</sup> Complicating this case for electoral self-determination was the fact that many of the State of Franklin's founders stood to profit from land claims tied to its statehood. But, like Jefferson, Franklin, and the other signers of the Declaration of Independence, they based their case for electoral self-determination, not on how it stood to benefit them personally, but rather on idealistic political grounds.

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<sup>71</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Kevin T. Barkesdale, *The Lost State of Franklin: America's First Secession* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 18. For accounts of a number of different attempts by self-declared frontier states and republics, including the State of Franklin, to petition Congress for recognition, see Frederick Jackson Turner, "Western State-Making in the Revolutionary Era," *The American Historical Review* 1, no. 2 (Jan., 1896), 251-269.

<sup>73</sup> See Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 35-37.

Correspondence between the State of Franklin's founders and Franklin himself, whose aid the State of Franklin's founders enlisted in pleading their case to Congress, demonstrated how readily this mixture of self-interest and frontier self-determination generated questions about what sorts of geographic and political distances produced virtual representation. In response to Cocke's plea that Congress serve as an "arbiter" between the State of Franklin and North Carolina, which had sought to block the western bid for self-determination, Franklin, after whom Cocke claimed to have named the would-be state, demurred:

'Tis happy for us all that we have now in our own Country such a Council [i.e. Congress] to apply to, for composing our Differences, without being oblig'd as formerly, to carry them across the Ocean, to be decided at an immense Expence, by a Council which knew little of our Affairs, would hardly take any Pains to understand them, and which often treated our Applications with Contempt, and rejected them with injurious Language.

In this reply, Franklin explicitly contrasted Britain's distant, virtual representation of the colonies' interest with Congress's ostensibly superior, local representation. But he did so as part of an exchange that invoked his and Congress's ability to represent the interests of an electorate replete with "Differences," regardless of which portions of that electorate put them in power. In other words, Franklin assured the State of Franklin's founders that Congress fulfilled their right to electoral self-determination by pointing out the ways their interests were virtually represented by Congress. In doing so, Franklin confounded any clean relationship between geographic distance and virtual representation. He asserted that Congress is closer, geographically and politically, to frontier settlers than Britain's Parliament was. But that very proximity was, paradoxically, premised on an electoral structure that limited – or at the very least did not provide a national venue to directly advocate for – the even more localized and granular sort of self-determination that the State of Franklin asserted.<sup>74</sup>

In a second exchange, Franklin alluded to the political danger that necessitated this paradoxical and unstable account of electoral representation as, simultaneously, virtual and not: self-determination on the frontier threatened the coherence of the United States as a whole. In response to Sevier's protest in 1787 that the North Carolina legislature had acted against settlers' interests in "Undertak[ing] to Reassume their Jurisdiction and Sovereignty over the State of Franklin" and had acted "Contrary to the

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<sup>74</sup> William Cocke to Benjamin Franklin, State of Franklin, June 15 1786; Benjamin Franklin to William Cocke, Philadelphia, Aug. 12. 1786. Having difficulty finding support in Congress for the "Independent State of Franklin," Sevier and his ally William Cocke sought out a patron in Franklin, after whom they had recently renamed the state from its original "Frankland." In this first letter, Cooke implored: "I make no doubt but You have heard that the good People of this Country have declared themselves a Separate State from North Carolina, and that as a Testimony of the High Esteem they have for the many Important and Faithful Services You have Rendred to Your Country to Commemorate You, they have Call'd the Name of their State after You." Franklin replied that "I had never before been acquainted that the Name of your intended New State, had any Relation with my Name, having understood that it was called *Frank Land*." In doing so, he pointed to the implicit *quid pro quo* and the specter of corrupting self-interest that threatened all elected representation – especially that premised on virtual representation.

Interest of the people in two of the Counties,” Franklin chastised the State of Franklin for failing to reign in settlers’ destabilizing land grabs:

[A Cherokee petitioner] was going to Congress with a Complaint from the Chiefs of the Cherokees, that the North Carolinians on one Side, and the People of your State on the other, encroach upon them daily. The Congress not being now Sitting, he is going back, apparently dissatisfied, that our General Government is not just now in a Situation to render them Justice, which may tend to increase ill Humour in that Nation. I have no doubt of the good Disposition of your Government to prevent their receiving such Injuries: but I know the strongest Governments are hardly able to restrain the disorderly People who are generally on the Frontiers, from Excesses of various kinds; and possibly yours has not yet acquired sufficient Strength for this purpose. It may be well however to acquaint those Encroachers that the Congress will not justify them in the Breach of a solemn Treaty, and that if they bring upon themselves an Indian War they will not be supported in it.<sup>75</sup>

Franklin’s answer underscores the risks posed by a central government not powerful or coherent enough to “restrain the disorderly People who are generally on the Frontiers . . . from Excesses of various kinds.” His statement critiques the leaders of the State of Franklin for failing to restrain their own settlers’ greed and, consequently, risking a war that would likely cost them dearly. At the same time, he alludes to a troubling parallel between the State of Franklin and the United States as a whole: like the State of Franklin, the United States was struggling to reign in the “Excesses” of self-determination on its frontier, which had produced a chaotic mixture of competing land claims that Congress struggled to mediate. The unconstrained self-determination of extant states, self-declared states like Franklin, and Native American tribes threatened to create a polity and electoral map that rendered the United States unrepresentable.

Only when read within this electoral context, in which Franklin believed the dangers of unconstrained frontier self-determination necessitated a disavowed embrace of virtual representation, do the political stakes of *Memoirs*’ depiction of Franklin’s own character fully emerge. This depiction stages repeated performances of Franklin’s failure to meaningfully differentiate vice and virtue, thereby destabilizing the distinction between actual virtue and virtue’s self-interested “virtual” simulacrum. For example, *Memoirs*’ opening pages celebrate Franklin’s “vanity” – which he argues “is often productive of Good to the Possessor” – alongside his “humility” without any value distinction between the two. Likewise, Franklin’s famed list of thirteen virtues itself plays to comic effect the narration’s flagrant refusal to clearly delineate between virtue and vice, in this case with tautologous and self-negating definitions of those virtues. For example, his advice to achieve resolution is by “resolv[ing] to perform what you ought [and p]erform[ing] without fail what you resolve,” and his exhortation to attain humility is by hubristically imitating both Jesus and Socrates.<sup>76</sup> What emerges from this narrative performance is a curious and unstable take on moral vices and virtues: on the one hand,

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<sup>75</sup> Benjamin Franklin to John Sevier, Philadelphia, June 30, 1787.

<sup>76</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 44, 149-50.



*Memoirs* repeatedly insists that there *are* meaningful distinctions to be made between them and that, in fact, the whole point of Franklin's decision to commit them to writing is to provide a moral example to America's future generations. On the other hand, in providing that example, *Memoirs'* repeatedly reveals that what appears to be a virtue might, in fact, be impossible to distinguish from virtue's opposite.

These performed failures to make distinctions between vice and virtue are central to *Memoirs'* abiding interest in the difficulty of distinguishing between actual virtue and virtue's mere appearance. Such difficulty is key, for example, to *Memoirs'*s explanation of the secret to Franklin's initial business success:

In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary. I drest plainly; I was seen at no Places of idle Diversion; I never went out a-fishing or shooting; a Book, indeed, sometimes debauch'd me from my Work; but that was seldom, snug, and gave no Scandal: and to show that I was not above my Business, I sometimes brought home the Paper I purchas'd at the Stores, thro' the Streets on a Wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem'd an industrious thriving young Man, and paying duly for what I bought, the Merchants who imported Stationary solicited my Custom, others propos'd supplying me with Books, and I went on swimmingly.<sup>77</sup>

This account leaves readers thoroughly confused about where Franklin's actual virtue ends and his performative simulacrum of it begins. Certainly Franklin must have been actually frugal and industrious given his ability to pay his bills on time. But is his confession, that "a Book . . . sometimes debauch'd me from my Work," a clear instance of having committed vice while feigning virtue? Or does the fact that his reading "gave no Scandal" – that, in other words, it neither undermined his *appearance* of virtue nor *actually prevented* him from paying his bills – mean that the activity he characterizes as vice is no vice at all, and thus that his virtue here is not, in fact, virtual but actual?

The distinctions between virtue and its performance only become more slippery when Franklin recounts how he made a point of occasionally pushing his wares home "thro' the streets in a Wheelbarrow." While Franklin's other main public performance of industry and frugality – his paying of his bills – is contingent on actual industry and frugality, his pushing a wheelbarrow through the street is not only not contingent on either industry or frugality but in fact potentially contrary to them if it, like his reading, takes him away from more productive work. Yet Franklin suggests such performances were essential to his "being esteem'd an industrious and thriving young Man." And this esteem – and the financial success that came with it – was essential to his becoming a frugal and industrious printer. So, where exactly in this wheelbarrow episode does Franklin's performance of industry and frugality end and his actual practice of those virtues begin?

This difficulty in distinguishing Franklin's actual virtuousness from his performance of virtue extends to *Memoirs'* portrayal of Franklin's political career. Take, for example, *Memoirs'* recounting of Franklin's complex and often embattled dealings

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 125-6, italics in original.

with the Penn family who, as Pennsylvania's Proprietors held the colony's royal charter. *Memoirs* frequently contrasts Franklin's own support, as representative in the Pennsylvania Assembly, for proposals aimed at "the Good of the People" with the Proprietors' self-interested attempts to obstruct assembly efforts to raise necessary revenue unless those efforts exempted the proprietary estate. However, *Memoirs* does so in part through the narrator's announcement "that whenever the public Measures [the Proprietor] propose'd should appear to be for the Good of the People, no one should espouse and forward them more zealously than myself."<sup>78</sup> This construction leaves ambiguous whether Franklin advocates "for the Good of the People" out of virtuous disinterest or out of a canny knack for spotting opportunities to *appear* to be a virtuously disinterested public servant while actually self-interestedly garnering proprietorial favor. Put another way, from *Memoirs*' description it is impossible to discern whether Franklin acts as an idealized virtual representative by selflessly putting the interests of the polity as a whole above all, or out of the self-interested ambition that had enabled Franklin's spectacular successes as a self-made man.

*Memoirs* likewise acknowledges this tension between virtuous representation of the polity as a whole and self-interested individual self-determination in its depiction of Franklin's decision to run for a seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly. In *Memoirs*, he asserts that he first decided to run for a seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly because he "conceiv'd becoming a Member would enlarge my Power of doing Good" – a motivation resplendent with virtuous disinterestedness. However, the text also acknowledges the role of self-interest in motivating his run, claiming, in a series of unsettling double-negatives and rhetorical reversals, "I would not however insinuate that my Ambition was not flatter'd by all these Promotions [of his candidacy]. It certainly was."<sup>79</sup> *Memoirs*' keen attention to the highly unstable distinction between actual virtue and its performed simulacrum leaves readers with the impression that both Franklin's individual virtue and the electoral representation he performs are virtual in two conflicting senses: first, in the original sense, increasingly archaic by the late eighteenth century, of actually "possess[ing] . . . certain physical virtues" or being "morally virtuous"; and second, in the modern sense of being something in appearance or effect but "not formally or actually."<sup>80</sup> The impression created by Franklin's "virtual virtue" is shimmering and holographic. Actual virtue and its performed simulacrum seem to align, as if for Franklin virtue and its virtual counterpart are somehow in fact one and the same. Yet, that alignment is never quite perfect. Franklin's virtual virtue always verges on revealing itself as mere illusion.

In permitting Franklin's self-interest to coincide with and merge into his virtuously disinterested representation of others' interests, such virtual virtue enables *Memoirs* to recuperate Franklin's participation in the British system of virtual representation that American revolutionaries had professed to despise. Indeed, Franklin's virtual virtue transforms this participation from potentially damning evidence of Franklin's self-interested moral and political turpitude into suggestive, albeit not

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 247.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, 196-7.

<sup>80</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "virtual."

definitive, evidence that self-interested performances of virtue might eradicate virtual representation's corruptions. After all, even if Franklin is self-interested, his need to perform a credible simulation of virtue results in him always acting on behalf of the public good. Because of this coincidence of virtue and self-interest, Franklin's past participation in virtual representation's corruptions becomes not an erratum to be disavowed but rather a central part of *Memoirs*' exemplary narrative of Franklin's "emerg[ence] from . . . Poverty and Obscurity . . . to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World."<sup>81</sup> In other words, virtual virtue remakes what would otherwise be complicity in the corruptions of British politics into yet more evidence of Franklin's and the United States' conjoined emergence from dependence into Enlightenment-inspired independence.

Even more importantly, the coincidence of virtue and its virtual simulation points to a way forward for the American electoral system by showing how virtual representation might not damagingly constrain but rather foster self-determination. *Memoirs* achieves this slight of hand through a performance of character that reconciles the tension between individual and collective self-determination by returning the character sketch to its moral roots. In *Memoirs*, Franklin's self-determination manifests not through an endlessly proliferating and splintering set of character types, but rather through the performance of a limited set of moral virtues like those sketched in Theophrastus's *The Characters*. By depicting these virtues as virtual, *Memoirs* offers a means to imagine how an American electoral system might permit individuals – including elected representatives – to pursue self-interested ambitions while nevertheless effecting meaningful electoral self-determination for their constituents. In addition, by showing how electoral representation could be premised on virtual virtue that relies on only a handful of moral categories rather than an endlessly expanding set of character types, *Memoirs* suggests how Americans might ease the tension between localized self-determination and coherent representation of the polity as a whole. In short, Franklin's virtual virtue generates representation in which what had seemed to be irreconcilable oppositions between virtue and self-interest, as well as between self-determination and collectively legible representation, instead productively coincide.

However, the sense of electoral coherence offered by Franklin's virtual virtue is a tenuous one. Its promise to stably represent electoral self-determination rests on a performance that seems to obviate unresolved questions, highlighted in Franklin's exchange with the founders of the State of Franklin, about how electoral representation spans geographic and political distance. But that literary performance is itself a product of and response to a deeply divided public reception of Franklin that registers the persistence of irreconcilable tensions within the aesthetics of political representation that *Memoirs*' virtual virtue sought to elide. Moreover, to the extent that *Memoirs*' offers any sort of political exemplum for the United States' future generations, it is premised on an electoral ideal that is as shimmering and holographic as Franklin's virtual virtue. The moral and electoral ideals *Memoirs* inculcates do not promise to create a stable, coherent American polity that has transcended the ineradicable tensions entailed in representing

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<sup>81</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 43.

self-determination. Rather, they foster a holographic mode of perception onto whose shimmering instability Americans could displace the intractable tensions that both *Memoirs* and its divisive context responded to. This mode of imagining electoral representation does not resolve the tensions inherent in representing self-determination. Instead, it merely contains them within a virtual virtue that promises confrontation with those tensions can be endlessly deferred.

## Part II: Caricature and the Gerry-Mander

The redrawing of electoral district boundaries to benefit the political party in power was widespread both before and after the American Revolution, but until 1812 no term existed for this practice. Rather, partisan redistricting was lumped together with a number of other common strategies for electoral manipulation, including switching from by-district to at-large elections, changing the property qualifications for voting, and consolidating districts so that a new, larger district elected two or more representatives. Moreover, although Anti-Federalists had remarked on the dangers of such “electioneering” during the Constitutional Debates, Americans widely tolerated strategic rejiggering of their electoral system.<sup>82</sup> In fact, during the United States’ first decades, dozens of such instances met with little or no outcry.<sup>83</sup>

That changed in 1812. The redistricting that gave birth to the term “gerrymander” was one of many that had taken place in Massachusetts over the previous decade, during which Federalists and Republicans had repeatedly traded control of the State Assembly. Yet this time Federalists, who themselves had used legislative majorities to redistrict for their State Assembly candidates, attacked the Republican-drawn map with an outraged broadside, “The Gerry-Mander. A New Species of Monster Which Appeared in the District Essex South” (Figure 2). The broadside featured an image of the new Essex South district transformed into a giant, dragon-like creature, which it termed the “The Gerry-Mander,” a portmanteau of “salamander” and the last name of Massachusetts’ Republican governor, Eldrige Gerry. Its text explained that a learned scientist, “Dr. Watergruel,” had identified the misshapen district as a new, monstrous species of lizard. The broadside’s characterization of the State Assembly’s electoral malfeasance quickly gained traction within and beyond Massachusetts. Its image circulated widely within New England periodicals, and the term “Gerry-mander” spread even further. “Gerry-mander” rapidly entered the national lexicon and within a year had been used to describe redistricting efforts up and down the eastern seaboard.

Yet, even as the term “gerrymander” spread, it resisted stable definition. As Timothy Pickering told Congress in 1814, “Every gentleman (it is presumed) now understands the meaning of the word *Gerrymander*, first applied in Massachusetts to a district *monstrously* distorted, for the purposes of carrying elections suited to the views of

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<sup>82</sup> For an example of such an Anti-Federalist argument, see “Brutus IV,” which states “By section 4, article I, the Congress are authorized, at any time, by law, to make, or alter, regulations respecting the time, place, and manner of holding elections for senators and representatives, except as to the places of choosing senators. By this clause the right of election itself, is, in a great measure, transferred from the people to their rulers. — One would think, that if any thing was necessary to be made a fundamental article of the original compact, it would be, that of fixing the branches of the legislature, so as to put it out of its power to alter itself by modifying the election of its own members at will and pleasure. When a people once resign the privilege of a fair election, they clearly have none left worth contending for,” *Storing*, 51-54.

<sup>83</sup> For a full account of how redistricting and other forms of electoral manipulation featured in American politics during colonial times and in the decades between the Revolution and 1812, see Elmer Cummings Griffith, *The Rise and Development of the Gerrymander* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1907), 23-61.

## THE GERRY-MANDER.

A new species of *Monster*, which appeared in *Essex South District* in Jan. 1812.



This image for research purposes only.  
Source: American Antiquarian Society.

"O generation of Vipers! who hath warned you of the wrath to come?"

THE horrid Monster of which this drawing is a correct representation, appeared in the County of Essex, during the last session of the Legislature. Various and manifold have been the speculations and conjectures, among learned naturalists respecting the *genus* and origin of this astonishing production. Some believe it to be the real *Basilisk*, a creature which had been supposed to exist only in the poet's imagination. Others pronounce it the *Serpens Monocephalus* of Pliny, or single-headed *Hydra*, a terrible animal of pagan extraction. Many are of opinion that it is the *Griffin* or *Hippogriff* of romance, which flourished in the dark ages, and has come hither to assist the knight of the rueful countenance in restoring that gloomy period of ignorance, fiction and imposition. Some think it the great Red Dragon, or Bunyan's *Apollyon* or the *Monstrum Horrendum* of Virgil, and all believe it a creature of infernal origin, both from its aspect, and from the circumstance of its birth.

But the learned Doctor Watergruel who is famous for peeping under the skirts of nature, has decided that it belongs to the *Salamander* tribe, and gives many plausible reasons for this opinion. He says though the Devil himself must undoubtedly have been concerned, either directly or indirectly in the procreation of this monster, yet many powerful causes must have concurred to give it existence, amongst which must be reckoned the present combustible and venomous state of affairs. There have been, (says the Doctor) many fiery ebullitions of party spirit, many explosions of democratic wrath and fulminations of gubernatorial vengeance within the year past, which would naturally produce an uncommon degree of inflammation and acrimony in the body politic. But as the Salamander cannot be generated except in the most potent degree of heat, he thinks these malignant causes, could not alone have produced such diabolical effects. He th...

Figure 2: "The Gerry-Mander. A New Species of Monster Which Appeared in the District Essex South." Boston: s.n., 1812. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

the then temporarily dominant party.”<sup>84</sup> However, this presumed understanding did not rest on any clear and consistent set of principles establishing what, precisely, constituted monstrous distortion. Indeed, the first tentative efforts to formalize such principles would not take place until the 1820s, when state constitutions began to specify rules for electoral districting.<sup>85</sup> The first Federal attempts to create uniform national standards for electoral districts would take an additional two decades, until the 1842 Apportionment Act nationally instituted a one-congressman-per-district. And courts would stay silent on electoral districting until a century after the Fourteenth Amendment laid the constitutional foundation for “one person, one vote.”<sup>86</sup>

Instead, as Chapters 3 and 4 show, early charges of gerrymandering relied largely on metaphors that cast the monstrous unnaturalness of the offending districts as aesthetically self-evident. Broadsides and editorials likened gerrymandered districts to rapaciously swallowing beasts, disfigured bodies with amputated limbs, and disturbing hybrids that blurred and distorted natural bounds. In doing so, they sometimes referenced now-familiar principles – like compactness, preservation of majority rule, and maintaining “communities of interest,” – but they applied these abstract principles selectively, in any given instance emphasizing the ones that dovetailed with their partisan aims and downplaying the others. As a result, the force of early gerrymandering accusations came, not primarily from the *ex post facto* reasoning used to make the case that a particular district or electoral boundary was monstrous, but instead from the assertion of monstrousness itself. At these accusations’ root was a deeply held conviction that gerrymandering, whatever it might entail in a practical sense, accurately identified *something* that grotesquely and monstrously deformed the natural electoral order.

The following two chapters reveal that crucial to this fraught understanding of gerrymandering as self-evidently unnatural was an aesthetic distinction – likewise

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<sup>84</sup> “Debate on the Loan Bill. Mr. Pickering’s speech. Continued,” *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, New York), April 6, 1814: 2.

<sup>85</sup> Article III, Section 6 of Missouri’s 1820 Constitution, for example, states that “The senate shall consist of not less than fourteen, nor more than thirty-three members; for the election, of whom the state shall be divided into convenient districts, which may be altered from time to time, and new districts established, as public convenience may require; and the senators shall be apportioned among the several districts according to the number of free white male inhabitants in each; provided, that when a senatorial district shall be composed of two or more counties, the counties of which such district consists shall not be entirely separated by any county belonging to another district, and no county shall be divided in forming a district.” *Constitution of the State of Missouri* (Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1820), 4-5.

<sup>86</sup> The foundational cases for current Federal precedents on gerrymandering date back to the 1960s, when, relying on the Fourteenth Amendment and the Voting Rights Act, the Supreme Court ruled that districting had to create substantially equal representation and that they could not be drawn in a way that would infringe on minorities’ rights, as articulated in Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. For more information on this Federal legal history, see Erik J. Engstrom, *Partisan Gerrymandering and the Construction of American Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013). As Peter H. Argersinger describes in *Representation and Inequality in Late Nineteenth-Century America: The Politics of Apportionment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), a wave of state-level court cases challenging partisan gerrymandering took place in the 1890s, but, despite courts’ forceful language regarding the threat the practice posed to the American electoral system, these cases were largely ineffective at stemming gerrymandering’s influence on American electoral politics.

presumed to be self-evident but in practice rife with unease – between character sketch and caricature. Chapter 3, “Caricature, Electoral ‘Combinations,’ and Self-Evidently Unnatural Representation” shows how early American campaign literature adopted and adapted this aesthetic distinction, first theorized by British writers and artists. In doing so, these early electoral pamphlets and broadsides helped develop the aesthetic and political groundwork for the notion, central to early American electoral politics, that there was a self-evident difference between legitimate electoral subgroups and unnatural electoral “combinations,” which colluded to distort electoral outcomes and amass illegitimate political power. However, because the line of distinction marking this difference could not be visually scrutinized or conceptually stabilized, early American electoral culture was imbued with a pervasive sense of unease regarding whether and how the distorting effects of electoral combinations could be recognized and stopped in practice.

Chapter 4, “The Gerry-Mander and the Mapping of Character,” shows how during the decades surrounding the 1812 coining of the “gerrymander” this aesthetic and political framework interacted with early American natural history and atlas culture to take on cartographical force. As a result, the legitimacy of early American electoral maps, both local and national, came to depend on the perception that their borders were natural. Yet, because within this aesthetic and political framework the line of distinction between natural and unnatural could never be clearly seen or stabilized, those maps’ claims to legitimacy – and, with them, that of the United States’ system of electoral representation more generally – remained abidingly uneasy, its legitimacy perpetually in doubt. While early accusations of gerrymandering promised to resolve this unease, they in fact perpetuated it by reinforcing a framework for representation in which legitimacy was premised on a notion of naturalness that was idealized as self-evident but that in practice could never be stably visualized or mapped.



### Chapter 3: Caricature, Electoral “Combinations,” and Self-Evidently Unnatural Representation

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, campaign pamphlets and broadsides relied heavily on written character “sketches” to disseminate information about candidates to the United States’ dispersed electorate. These sketches were only rarely accompanied by images, which required investing money and time into woodcuts or engraved plates. Yet, through metaphors of drawing and painting they promised the written equivalent of visual immediacy. A pamphlet supporting Federalist Christopher Gore’s 1809 campaign for the Massachusetts governorship was a typical example. The pamphlet asserts that it was “useful to contrast minutely [its] sketch of the life and public services of Mr. Gore, with the most flattering portrait of [his Democratic-Republican opponent] Mr. [Levi] Lincoln [Sr.], which has been, or can be drawn, by the most skillful of his democratic *dauber’s*.” Doing so, the pamphlet contended, would reveal a clear “line of distinction” between the two candidates’ “characters.”<sup>87</sup>

However, these metaphors of drawing and painting left unanswered how such seemingly self-evident visual distinctions translated from image to text. How, for example, were voters to discern whether an unscrupulous partisan had “daub[ed],” “blur[red],” or otherwise flatteringly fudged the outline of a candidate’s character when two opposing campaigns each claimed that *its* sketches were true representations? Lending urgency to such questions was the fact that such metaphors created an aura of self-evidence that bypassed reasoned argument. They encouraged readers to form impressions of candidates – as Locke’s definition of “self-evidence” puts it in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* – by giving “assent . . . at first sight” and “without any proof.”<sup>88</sup> For instance, the distinction the Gore pamphlet makes between its own accurately “sketched” portrait and Lincoln’s deceiving “daubed” one relies rhetorically on a suggestion of visual immediacy. It proceeds as though readers could and would respond to its claims about each candidate’s character as though they were images, “assent[ing]” instantaneously rather than evaluating a series of written propositions on logical and factual grounds. However, the representations producing this “assent at first sight” were not literal sketches but metaphors of sketching and painting, begging the question: How can voters trust in a clear political “line of distinction” that they do not actually see?

The unstable confluences of visual, written, and electoral representation enacted by such metaphors registered abiding unease concerning whether and how Americans could prevent illegitimate “combinations” from co-opting their electoral representation. In the early United States, the term “combination” could describe any group that sought local or national power for its own ends, but it most commonly referred to interest groups or political parties thought to exert undue electoral influence. As partisan and sectional

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<sup>87</sup> Citizen of Worcester, “Who shall be governor? Or, A contrast of the characters of Gore and Lincoln. / By a citizen of Worcester,” (Northampton, MA: Printed by William Butler, 1809).

<sup>88</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, Peter H. Niddich, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 591.

divisions became increasingly entrenched, such “combinations” came to seem an existential threat to the early United States – one that could lead to outright secession or, even more troublingly, to an illegitimate elected government that returned the United States to the functional equivalent of monarchical rule. Consequently, ensuring that electoral results were true to the electorate, not warped by combinations, came to seem essential to preserving the United States’ representative government and the American Revolution’s legacy.

However, reliably identifying electoral combinations proved difficult in practice. Opposing candidates, parties, and regional interests all portrayed themselves as true representatives of the electorate and, by extension, the United States’ revolutionary ideals. Likewise, they cast their electoral competition as usurpers, linking attacks on candidates’ personal characters to accusations that a combination threatened to undermine the representativeness of elected government as a whole. In drawing such “line[s] of distinction” between true representation and illegitimate combinations, such campaign rhetoric entrenched the notion that the legitimacy of electoral representation *should* be self-evident. Yet, paradoxically, this rhetoric demonstrated that what constituted a self-evidently legitimate electoral subgroup was not, in fact, self-evident at all.

This chapter shows that structuring how Americans negotiated this tension between self-evident ideal and ambiguous electoral reality was a generic distinction between character sketches, which were believed to accurately represent nature, and caricatures, which were thought to depict unnatural monsters. The political importance of this distinction, first theorized by eighteenth-century writers and artists in Britain and Europe, has been overlooked by scholarship focused primarily on moral character’s importance to the rhetoric of Republican virtue and on the aesthetics of “discerning” moral and social character within an increasingly complex American society.<sup>89</sup> However, the aesthetic discourse surrounding character sketches and caricature is fundamental to the understanding of electoral representation that emerged in the United States during the

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<sup>89</sup> The extant scholarship on character, especially virtuous character, and the early Republic is vast and multi-disciplinary. Key strands include works on Republican motherhood, e.g. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Oct. 1987): 689-721; Fliegelman’s discussion of embodiment, character, and Revolutionary rhetoric in *Declaring Independence*; and Warner’s account of the circulation of character in *Letters of the Republic*. Literary scholars have done substantial work regarding the ways written representations of character registered growing concerns about how to “read” strangers’ characters within a society in which both people and texts circulated freely, as well as the ways those concerns dovetailed with uncertainty about how to conceptualize an American polity – see, for example, Warner’s discussion of “characters,” or letters of reference, in *Letters of the Republic* or Davidson’s discussion of the picaresque in *Revolution and the Word*. More recently, Lukasik’s *Discerning Characters* has connected those concerns about legibility to popular ideas about visual aesthetics and physiognomy in the early United States. However, while all of this scholarship posits an inextricable relationship between character and early American politics, none addresses the specifically electoral register of this connection. Likewise, none of this work addresses how the particular aesthetic discourse surrounding character sketches and caricature infiltrated American literature or political thought.

first two decades of the nineteenth century. American campaign literature drew on the supposedly self-evident distinction between character sketches and distorted, unnatural caricatures in order to naturalize and legitimate particular electoral outcomes. Yet the unstable visual metaphors through which it did so reflected ongoing uncertainty about how representation – whether written, visual, or electoral – laid self-evident claim to the natural world and human beings’ existence within it.

By attending to how uneasy interrelationships between caricature, Enlightenment empiricism, and physiognomy perpetuated such uncertainty, this chapter reveals that early U.S. notions of electoral legitimacy depended upon a peculiarly indeterminate sense of representation that was reinforced by the visual metaphors in American campaign literature. Key to this conception of representation was an unstable enmeshment of the written, the visual, and the electoral in the aesthetic discourse concerning depictions of character. This enmeshment, which treated as self-evident the parallels between these three modes, contained without resolving the tensions between two irreconcilable visions of empiricist representation: The first, tied to the character sketch, held that natural categories and the “lines of distinction” between them were self-evident. The second, linked to natural science and physiognomic caricature, grudgingly acknowledged that hybridity and natural gradients render such self-evident distinctions impossible. Representational aesthetics that did not force a choice between these two notions of empiricism was essential for sustaining the electoral system of a new United States, which was still very much unsure how to ascertain electoral legitimacy or ensure that electoral representation furthered, rather than undermined, the Revolution’s Enlightenment ideals. However, as early American discourse around electoral combinations shows, that irresolution came at a cost: it infused American electoral culture with an abiding sense of unease concerning whether even seemingly self-evident acts of representation could be trusted.

This chapter begins with an account of how early nineteenth century campaign literature adopted and reinscribed the ostensibly self-evident and extensively theorized distinction between empiricist character sketches and unnatural caricatures. It then explores how visual and written representational practices often undermined that distinction, especially so in the case of physiognomic heads, whose affinities with caricature coexisted uneasily with physiognomy’s claims to empiricist natural science. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how this inability to reliably distinguish caricature from character shaped the aesthetic discourse around legitimate electoral representation in the early United States. Essential to this aesthetic discourse, the chapter reveals, was the assertion of clear “line[s] of distinction” between combinations and legitimate representation that, because of campaign literature’s unstable enmeshments between written, visual, and electoral representation, could not be closely examined.

When early American campaign materials presented “sketches” of candidates’ characters, they participated and extended a practice of representation that was wildly popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While written character sketches dated back millennia, the genre experienced a renaissance after new translations of the Greek philosopher Theophrastus’s ancient treatise on categories of virtues and vices, *The*

*Characters*, were published in the early seventeenth century. In the two centuries that followed, thousands of sketches of individuals or, more often, social and moral types, were printed in Britain and Western Europe, either singly or in vast compendiums. Both in terms of quantity and in terms of literary influence, character sketches dominated the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary scene in a way that present-day focus on better-known genres like novels, poems, and plays has obscured.<sup>90</sup>

What distinguished the character sketch as a genre was an empiricist drive to apprehend and describe characters that were true to nature. This empiricism had two key elements. First, character sketches aspired not to fiction, invention, or whimsy but instead, as Gally's 1725 "Critical Essay on Characteristic-Writings" put it, to give "exact representations of human Nature."<sup>91</sup> Second, character sketches associated empiricist representation not with detail or particularity but rather with typification. As Walwyn explained in his 1782, *Essay on Comedy*, character sketches should strive to depict "general characters," since overly "particular characters" will not allow readers to perceive and contemplate the character types – such as the "vain man" – that categorize and define "human nature" as a whole.<sup>92</sup>

Such theorizing established the character sketch as the fundamental unit in a distinctive sort of social and moral empiricism. The focus of this empiricism was not on using the character sketch to describe human nature's nuances and particulars. Instead, this empiricism aimed to ensure character sketches functioned as accurate apparatuses for organizing and clarifying the traits essential to a given individual or type. "Well-drawn characters," as eighteenth-century theorists often referred to such character sketches, not only gave depictions of their human subjects but also refined and reinforced the categorical abstractions that structured how human beings perceived human nature. By grouping and emphasizing aspects of that nature, character sketches made legible to "nature at large" qualities that would otherwise be obscured by human nature's infinite particulars.<sup>93</sup>

Frequently, such theorizing described the character sketch's distilled but exact representations of nature by contrasting their empiricism with caricature's license. Most often, writers simply presented this contrast as a given. Walwyn, for example, critiques the "literary pilfering" of second-rate dramatists by saying they "substitute . . . caricature for nature."<sup>94</sup> However, writers occasionally discussed the distinction between character and caricature at length. For instance, Henry Fielding wrote in his preface to his 1742 novel, *Joseph Andrews*:

[T]he greatest excellence of [characters] consist[s] in the exactest copy of nature; insomuch, that a judicious eye instantly rejects anything *outré*; any liberty which

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<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of the character sketch's revival, popularity, and influence in Britain and Europe, see Smeed, *The Theophrastan 'Character'* and Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 29-70. See also Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 182-186.

<sup>91</sup> Gally, "Critical Essay," 37.

<sup>92</sup> Walwyn, *Essay on Comedy*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 13.

the painter hath taken with the features of that *alma mater*. Whereas in the *Caricatura* we allow all licence. Its aim is to exhibit monsters, not men; and all distortions and exaggerations whatever are within its proper province.<sup>95</sup> At the crux of Fielding's and other theorists' logic was the belief that, where characters "cop[ied] nature as it was," caricatures took "licence" with nature and, consequently, "exhibited monsters, not men." This split was so pervasive and fundamental to how Fielding and his contemporaries understood the character sketch that it permeated their rhetoric even when caricature was not explicitly mentioned. Gally, for example, asserts that a French writer had, through his "excess," focused on the "Irregularities of Life," and his "false colors" had not created "Characters . . . found in nature" but rather "convert[ed] Men into Monsters."<sup>96</sup> These rhetorical contrasts established within eighteenth-century literary culture the conviction that there was a sharp divide: on one side was an empiricism of "well-drawn" characters that not only represented individuals as they were but also clarified and refined the categories and types needed to understand human nature. On the other were caricatured representations that, because of their willingness to take license with both individual subjects and the categorical abstractions, depicted unnatural monsters.

In the early United States, campaign materials used this stark distinction between the character sketch's empiricism and caricature's unnatural license to cast favored candidates as sound representatives while delegitimizing opponents and their supporters as "combinations." For example, an 1809 pamphlet supporting Lincoln, in the Lincoln-Gore Massachusetts gubernatorial race, used a reference to Lincoln's "unspotted character" in order to cement the legitimacy of Lincoln's promised Democratic-Republican administration, which would resist a Federalist "combination" that threatened to "sever the union." Key to this visual metaphor's power was the notion that legitimate representation depended on a refusal to spot, daub, shade, or otherwise distort the clean lines that define natural categories. The pamphlet's text suggests how Lincoln's opposition to New England's increasingly regional Federalism – an opposition the pamphlet bolsters with quotes from George Washington's call for national unity in his 1796 "Farewell Address" – could translate these aesthetic values to electoral politics: like Washington, Lincoln would "frown upon" any political force that threatened to alter the United States' natural bounds by "alienating any portion of our country from the rest." Put more succinctly, by tying Lincoln's resistance against a regional Federalist "combination" to his "unspotted" – and thus cleanly drawn – individual character, the pamphlet depicts Lincoln as an ideal representative of Revolutionary ideals that were inextricable from the character sketch's empiricist aesthetics.<sup>97</sup>

Even more explicit was an 1803 broadside, "To the people at York, and all those who are acquainted with the character of George Spangler," which fused written and visual references associating combination and caricature in its charges that Spangler's

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<sup>95</sup> Henry Fielding, Henry, *The History and Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, 1742, Douglas Brooks-Davies, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 5.

<sup>96</sup> Gally, "Critical Essay," 67.

<sup>97</sup> "Taunton, March 25, 1809: Sir, The annual election of state officers, is now at hand" (Boston?: s.n., 1809).

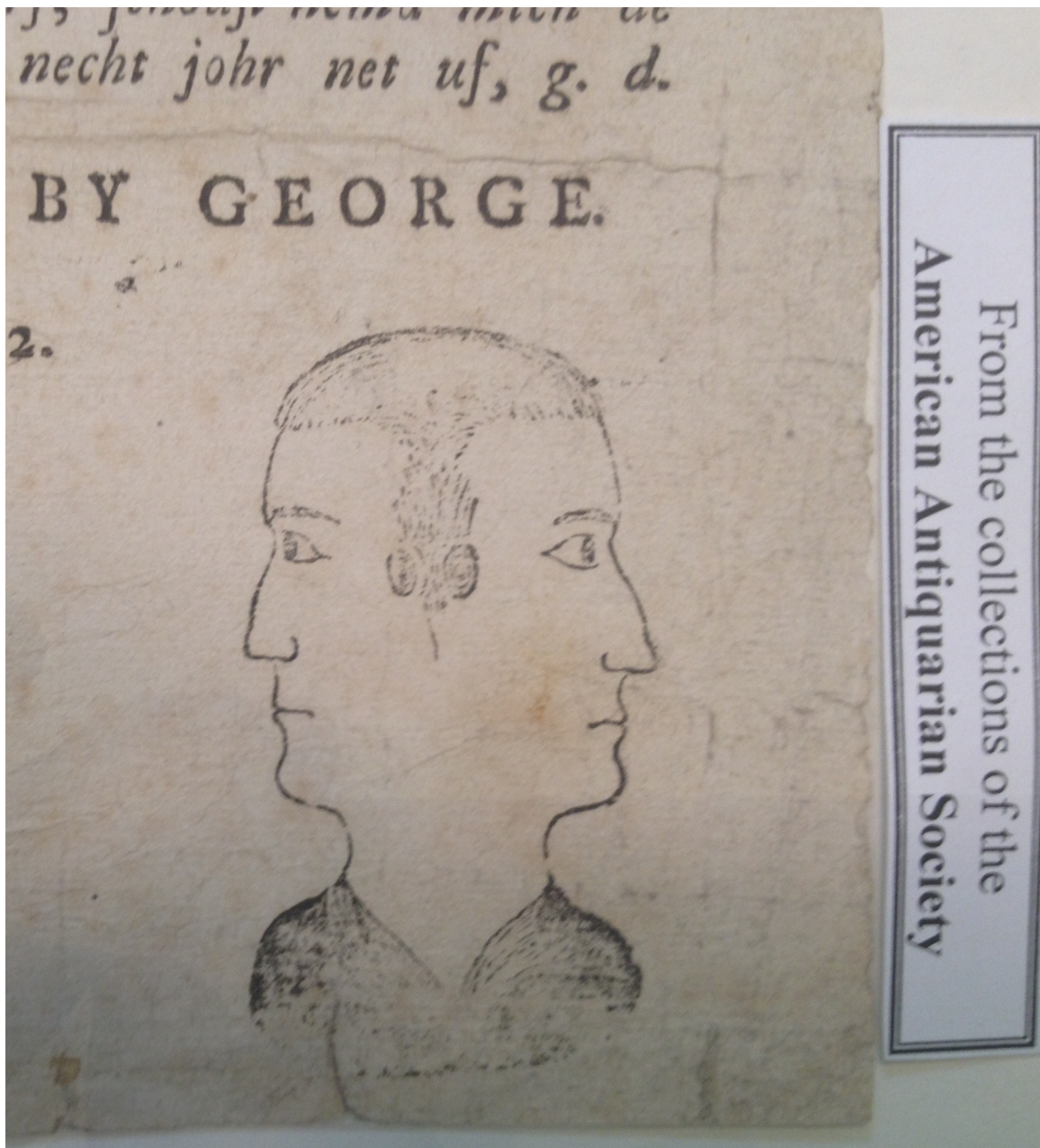


Figure 3: "By George," from "To the people at York, and all those who are acquainted with the character of George Spangler." York, PA: s.n., 1803. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

nomination as a candidate for Pennsylvania State Assembly was the work of an electoral "combination." Most directly, the pamphlet paired accusations that Spangler was nominated because "delegates . . . combine[d]" to "rool the hoal kaunty" with a caricature

that literally combines two faces (Figure 3).<sup>98</sup> Juxtaposed with the broadside's description of party leaders conspiring to hold the nomination meeting at a "season when farmers have no time to attend" is an image in which two profiles – neither of which would register on its own as caricatured – join into a monstrous, two-faced head. Together, these profiles create the suggestion of a third, monstrous face, in which the whorls that marked the ears of the two separate faces are transformed into a second set of eyes – or, perhaps, nostrils – that sit in the center of an eerily expansive visage. The power of the juxtaposition resides in its visual pun: what makes this pair of profiles into a monstrous caricature is precisely the act of combination, a term that also names Spangler's alleged political malfeasance.

This pun on combination and two-facedness redounds through the broadside's written text, especially in its claim that "honest men will not vote for" Spangler because of "*his conduct in Negro-huts, Whiskey shops, Market-Houses, Public streets, and before the Election Poles.*" The pun works on two levels. First, it links the broadside's monstrous, two-faced visual caricature to the deception implicit in Spangler's frequenting "Whiskey shops," using "common stile and daily language," and cavorting with a "Negro wench" despite coming from a "respectable family." Spangler is two-faced, the caricature suggests, because he has privately engaged in such disreputable behavior while at the same time publicly trading on his polite connections and respectable family name to secure votes. Second, the pun links the act of combining two faces to Spangler's transgression of ethnic, class, and racial boundaries: at the "Whiskey shops," Spangler would necessarily mingle with lower-class men of ill-repute; and the dialect in the broadside links him to an ethnic group, Germans, that many Anglo-Pennsylvanians regarded as not fully American because of their Catholicism and alien cultural norms. As such, Spangler's actions resulted in combinations of class and ethnic groups that many Pennsylvanians felt should be kept separate. By this same logic, even more troubling was the charge that Spangler had fathered a "mulato child" through his "conduct in Negro-huts," combining races in a way that, according to most of his contemporaries, resulted in monstrously hybrid life. Taken together, then, the broadside's punning reflects and reinforces a political and aesthetic logic in which combinations, two-faced deception, and caricature's monstrous distortions of nature's true categories are all reciprocally entailed. Spangler's personal character flaws also commit unnatural transgressions of class, race, and ethnic boundaries, and the resulting combinations share something essential with both the caricature of Spangler itself and the political act that justifies it.

However, while such references to caricature in early American campaign literature presumed and reinforced the notion that there was a self-evident distinction between unnatural combinations and legitimate electoral representation, that distinction proved difficult to agree upon in practice. The United States at the turn of the nineteenth century was marked by interlocking sets of local, regional, partisan, and economic interests, and this state of affairs produced uncertainty about what, for instance, separated a local group of citizens with a shared interest or party affiliation from a "combination."

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<sup>98</sup> "To the people at York, and all those who are acquainted with the character of George Spangler ..." (York, Pennsylvania: s.n., 1803).

Routinely, candidates accused of joining in a combination would dismiss the charges as mere petty partisanship – as Federalists did in the Lincoln-Gore gubernatorial contest among other New England races. Occasionally, two opponents would each accuse the other of benefitting from a combination. Within this environment, caricatures and character sketch metaphors proved handy for persuasive campaign rhetoric, but they offered no reliable guidance about how to determine whether a particular group constituted a combination. Instead, such visual metaphors insisted on a self-evident distinction between legitimate representation and combinations even as repeated public disagreements demonstrated that the distinction was in fact not self-evident at all.

Underlying this difficulty of identifying combinations was an epistemological confusion about how, in practice, to separate the empiricism celebrated by the character sketch from the distortion epitomized by caricature. This confusion was masked by, even as it was replicated within, early American campaign literature's reliance on metaphors of sketching and drawing. William Hogarth's 1743 print, *Characters and Caricaturas* (Figure 4), which quotes and expounds upon Fielding's discussion of caricature and character in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, takes this uncertainty as its subject. In its bottom quintile, the sketched faces on the left and the caricatures on the right are clearly separated by a pair of vertical lines and a disruption of the horizontal background etching. However, this clear division disappears and the distinction between character and caricature becomes ambiguous in the sea of faces that takes up the majority of the engraving. While these faces, too, are roughly divided into characters on the left and caricatures on the right, the precise border between the two categories is difficult to discern, with some faces on the left half of the picture edging toward caricatured exaggeration, and vice versa. This muddled arrangement of sketched and caricatured faces begs the question: at what point does a defining facial characteristic shift from an empiricist marker of character to an exaggerated or monstrous marker of caricature? The sketch's renderings of faces with strongly arched noses, sloped brows, and pointed chins refuse easy answers. As Lynch puts it, "the longer one looks at the engraving, the more it seems that Hogarth's subject is *literally* the fine line between character and caricature."<sup>99</sup>

Compounding this unease was the influence of a second strand of Enlightenment empiricism in the early United States: natural history that seeks to classify and catalogue the world's species. This sort of natural science had a long history on the European continent, emblemized by works like Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735) and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1804). Its influence in America began in pre-Revolutionary times with the work of self-taught naturalists like botanist William Bartram, and Thomas Jefferson's 1785, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which used charts, lists, and natural-scientific descriptions of plants and animals to catalogue the natural resources of Virginia. Foundational to this empiricist methodology was the belief that it was possible to organize flora and fauna into clear, precise, stable, and scientific categories. Jefferson, for example, argued that "[e]very race of animals seems to have received from their Maker" a fixed range of parameters "at the time of their formation." He continues, remarking that "[w]hat intermediate station" within this

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<sup>99</sup> Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 65-66.



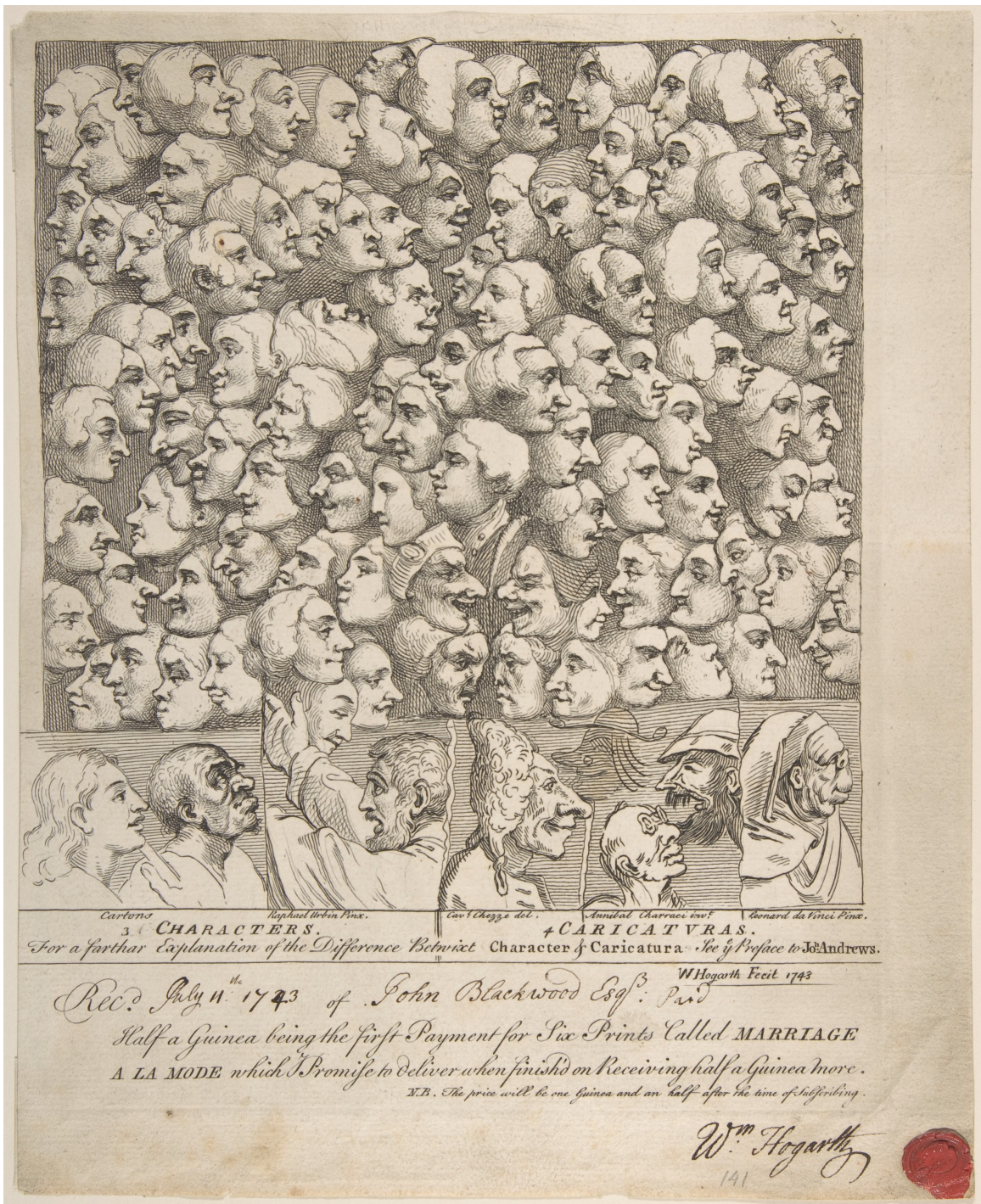


Figure 4: William Hogarth. *Characters and Caricatures*. Etching, 1743.

range a particular individual or subset of a species possesses “depend[s] upon soil, on climate, [and] on food.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, empirically sound natural history rested on the premise that, while members of a particular species need not be perfectly uniform, they all fell within certain stable and identifiable natural bounds.

However, natural scientists struggled to reconcile this belief in clearly delineated species with the empirical fact of natural gradients, which produced ambiguity about when differences among members of a given species merely constituted natural variation and when instead they evidenced a separate species’ formation. Jefferson, for instance, complained that European naturalists had unfairly compared the American grey fox to the European red as though red and grey foxes were merely two variations of the same species instead of different species’ entirely. Likewise, his reckoning of unique species “aboriginal” to Europe and America boasted large numbers for the American continent, and he used this reckoning to argue for the American climate’s fertility. But a closer examination of his charts reveals that driving those numbers was aggressive subdivision of species. For example, Jefferson’s table lists four different kinds of skunks (“mouffette”), five different kinds of armadillos (“tatou”), six different kinds of tamarin monkeys (“sagoin”), and six different kinds of squirrels, including the red squirrel, the black squirrel, “greater” and “lesser” grey squirrels.<sup>101</sup> If, as Jefferson argued, all species contain within themselves gradients of natural variation, what informed these particular subdivisions? Why, for instance, were American squirrels sorted by color – and only the grey squirrels sorted by size? And how should a natural scientist have decided where to draw the line between those lesser greys and their larger counterparts if variation within both species meant the tallest “lesser” greys were nearly as tall as the shortest “greater” greys?

Questions like these about how to categorize and represent a natural world filled with gradients proved especially pertinent to those tasked with sketching physiognomic heads, whose twin investments in the natural sciences and representational aesthetics undermined any sense of a clean binary between empiricist character sketch and unnatural caricature. Take, for instance, French artist Charles LeBrun’s 1671 animal heads, which helped to inaugurate physiognomic visual culture (Figure 5). In the accompanying physiognomic treatise, now lost, Le Brun announced the sketches’ empiricist intent to depict the natural signs that mark the subject’s character and temperament.<sup>102</sup> However, in rendering visible such markings of character, LeBrun created human faces so monstrous, distorted and exaggerated that they scarcely look human. Rather, they resemble the caricatures with which Hogarth, a century later, would populate *Characters and Caricaturas*. As such, they and the many other physiognomic heads that fill seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises suggest profound uncertainty

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1785, Frank Shuffelton, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 48.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, 51-55.

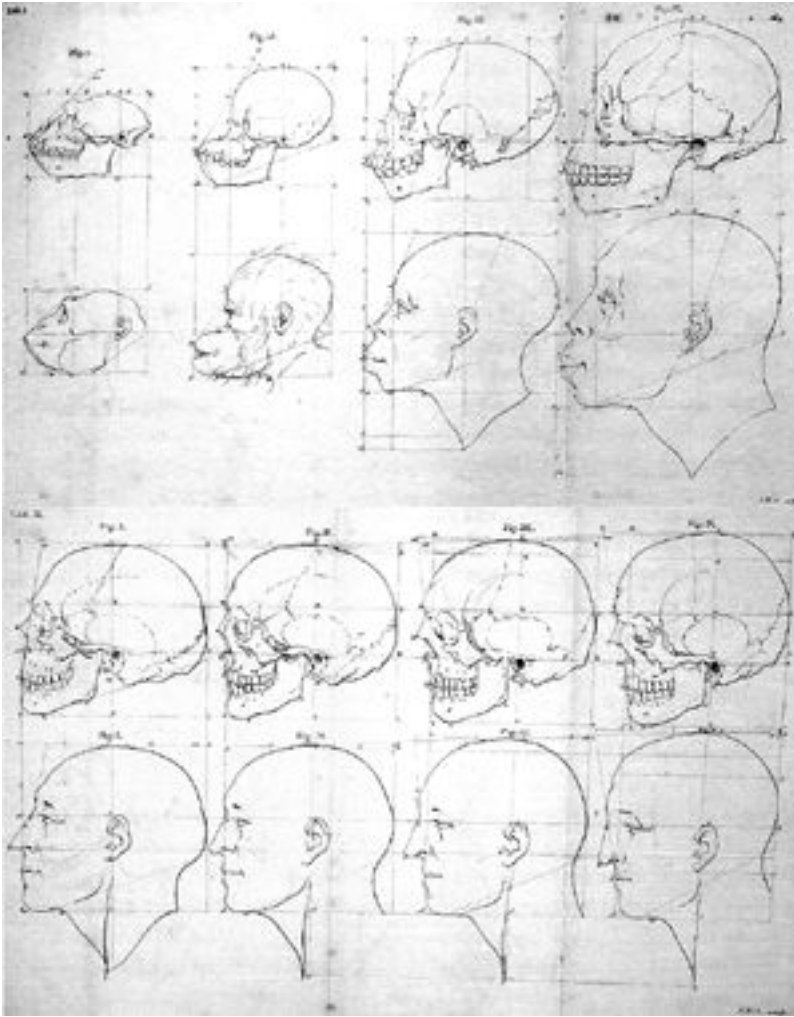
<sup>102</sup> For a detailed discussion of the theoretical basis for Le Brun’s physiognomic sketches, see Jennifer Montagu, *The Expressions of the Passions: the Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun’s Conférence Sur L’expression Générale Et Particulière* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 9-38.





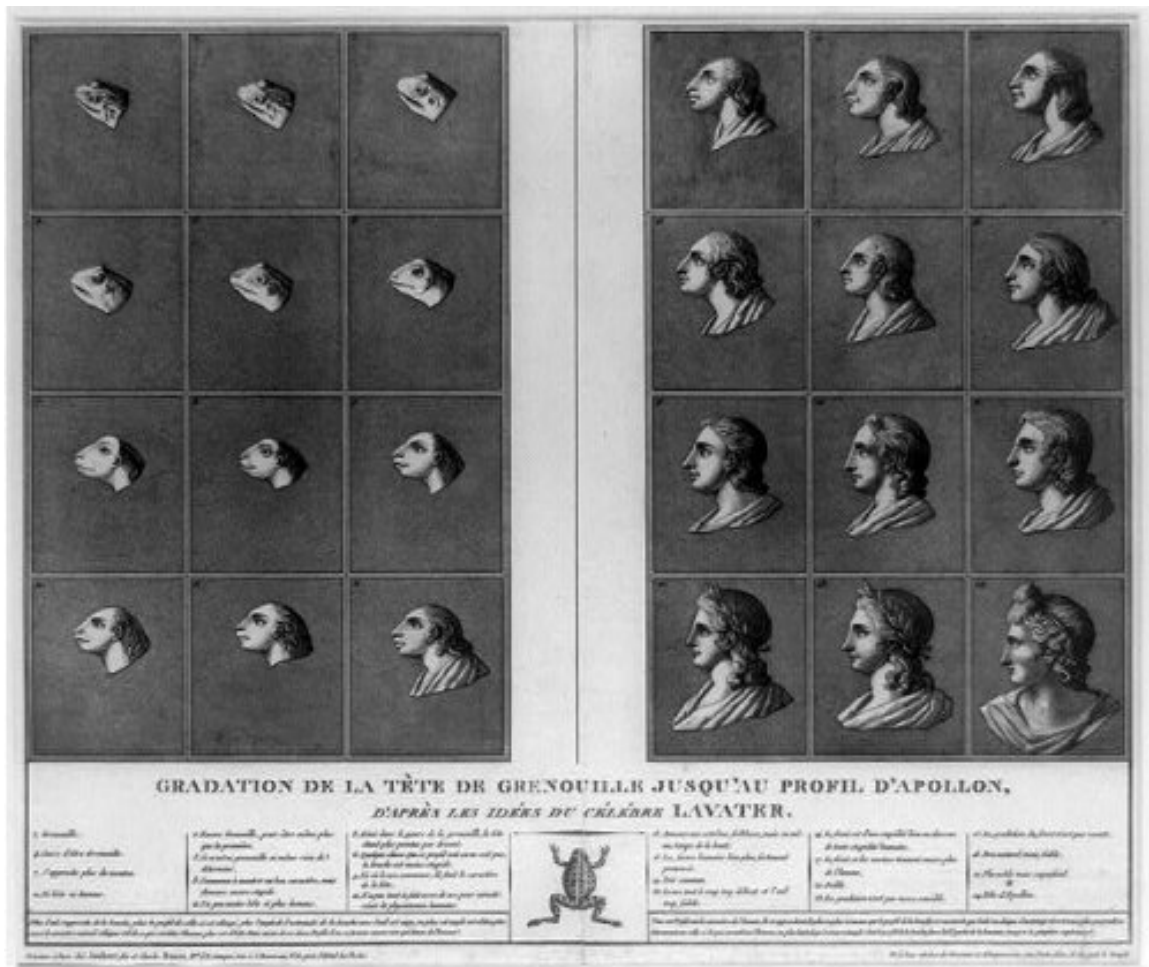
**Figure 5: Engraving of "Relation of the Human Face to that of the Eagle," c. 1806. After the 1671 drawing by Charles Le Brun.**

about whether and how physiognomic sketches represent their subjects' natural inclinations. Do their depictions of subjects' faces represent the extreme end of a natural physiognomic gradient, meaning their distortions amount, in effect, to naturally occurring caricatures? Or do the physiognomic heads somehow adapt the aesthetic logic of caricature to empiricism, offering useful distortions whose monstrous exaggeration makes apparent some essential but hidden aspect of character?



**Figure 6: Engraving illustrating Petrus Camper's theory of facial angles, c. 1790. After the canvases presented by Camper during his 1770 lectures to the Amsterdam Drawing Academy.**

Physiognomic heads arranged in a series raised especially troubling questions about both the nature of the character sketch's empiricism, in particular, and the foundations of empiricist thought, more generally, by making visible the tension between stably defined natural categories and natural gradients. For instance, Dutch naturalist and artist Petrus Camper's 1770 series of physiognomic heads (Figure 6) ostensibly offers a visual representation of a means for classifying and differentiating race and species, specifically by drawing a "characteristic line" from jaw to brow. However, the cumulative effect produced by Camper's drawings of individual faces is one not of stable categorization but of mutation. The faces seem to morph one into the other as the eye moves from the two monkey heads to the "African," the "Kamyluk" or Asian, the "Moor," and finally to the European faces that culminate in "Apollo." Consequently, as a series, the physiognomic heads suggest not clearly categorized racial and ethnic groups – or even a clear distinction between man and animal – but instead an amorphous gradient



**Figure 7: Gradation de la tête de grenouille jusqu'au profil d'Apollon, d'après les idées du célèbre Lavater, c.1804/10 Etching, engraving and aquatint. After that in Johann Casper Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1789-98.**

upon which art and science have unstably imposed rigid lines and boxes.<sup>103</sup> A similar instability pervades renowned physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater's 1750 depiction of a frog transformed by stages into the Apollo Belvedere (Figure 7). While the series ostensibly offers discrete images, taken together those images form a continuous gradient that leaves ambiguous what, precisely, distinguishes representations of the two species or whether any stable distinction in fact exists.

What emerges from such physiognomic depictions is the possibility of an amorphous natural world in which no empiricist category is self-evident and monstrous

<sup>103</sup> For a more extensive account of Camper's beliefs about scientific beauty and distinctions among races as well as between man and animal, see Paul van den Akker, "Petrus Camper on natural design and the beauty of Apollo's profile," in *Petrus Camper in context: Science, the arts, and society in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic*, eds. Klaas van Berkel and Bart Ramakers, eds. (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2015), 243-74.

liminal cases render the boundaries between categories ambiguous. Anticipated by Locke's account of empiricist human perception in *Essay*, this natural world is one in which, as Locke put it, "there is *no* such thing" as "precise and *unmovable Boundaries*" between categories "*made by Nature*." Instead, the depictions of, for example, "frog" and "Apollo" that bookend Lavater's physiognomic series are not self-evidently empiricist natural categories whose stability empiricist thinkers can take for granted. Rather, Lavater's series suggests – or at the very least cannot dispel the possibility – that the designations of "frog" and "Apollo" represent uneasy efforts to impose an illusion of natural distinctions on a natural continuum along which no "precise and immovable boundaries" can be drawn. Similarly, the monstrous, quasi-humanoid faces that populate both the intermediate reaches of the frog-Apollo series and LeBrun's physiognomic caricatures exemplify the difficulty reifying, or even stabilizing, empiricist categories in a world marked by hybridity and liminality. The works of Hogarth, Fielding, and other eighteenth-century theorists of the character sketch take for granted that there *is* a self-evident division between empiricist character sketches and unnatural caricatures, even if the fine line between the two is hard to pin down in practice. By contrast, physiognomic caricature troubles such self-assurance by offering visual representations of the natural world that, as with Locke's examples of a part-man, part animal monster and an "oddly-shaped," dubiously human "*Foetus*," raise the possibility that the species divisions blurred by such hybridization were never stable or naturally distinct.<sup>104</sup> Rather, as physiognomic heads suggest, those apparently natural categories might instead be imposed by human perception of a natural world dominated not by fixed bounds but rather endless gradients.

The specter that even seemingly self-evident empiricist distinctions might not reveal natural bounds "received from" a divine "Maker," as Jefferson phrased it, but instead reflect arbitrary divisions created by human perception haunted a U.S. electoral system founded in opposition to arbitrary power. Early modern and Enlightenment thinkers – including Francis Osborne, John Milton, Algernon Sidney, and William Paley – routinely invoked the notion of arbitrary power to describe the threat posed by monarchy to individual liberty. Locke's *Second Treatise*, which distilled and further developed this line of political thought, refers to arbitrary power more than 100 times.<sup>105</sup> During the American Revolution, frustrated colonists charged both the British Parliament and King George III specifically with exercising power "arbitrarily," and, after the Revolution, "arbitrary" became shorthand for anything that might either return the United States to monarchy itself or institute some other form of governance marked by tyrannical power. Topping the list of such threats were electoral combinations that could hand power either to traitorous anglophile monarchists or an internal cabal.<sup>106</sup> An electoral system premised on representation consistent with the character sketch's empiricism promised to prevent such a disaster by grounding American governance in

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<sup>104</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 454-55.

<sup>105</sup> See Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55-80, for examples of how early modern political thinkers invoked the concept of "arbitrary power."

<sup>106</sup> For extensive discussion of the conceptual role arbitrary power played in Revolutionary-era understandings of electoral representation, see Reid, *The Concept of Representation*.

natural categories and natural law. But if the naturalness of those categories and the self-evidence of the divisions between them could not be taken for granted – if, in other words, American electoral representation might rest on arbitrary “line[s] of distinction” – how, then, could an American electoral system be prevented from recreating the sort of arbitrary power the United States had fought a war to escape? And how, without recourse to stable natural categories and aesthetic principles that guaranteed their empiricist representation, could Americans even know whether their electoral system functioned soundly or had been usurped by a combination?

While rarely directly acknowledged, such anxieties percolated through early American campaign literature as it tried, without success, to use the distinction between empiricist character sketch and unnatural caricature to stabilize the difference between legitimate electoral representation and distorting “combination.” In the Spangler broadside, for example, the concluding signature, “by George,” directly above the two-headed image, enacts this intractable instability even as it participates in the broadside’s effort to cast Spangler as the figurehead of a local combination. The signature is, most directly, a satirical assertion that Spangler, whose first name is George, has personally composed and signed off on the portion of the broadside’s text, written in an ethnic German dialect. More importantly, though, the signature is also a pun on the notion that Spangler is a literal “bi-George” – a monstrous, two-headed creature that personally embodies dangerous, disruptive combinations. Through this pun, the signature calls attention to the contrasts between Spangler and the George most frequently referenced in early American campaign literature: George Washington. The subject of numerous character sketches and biographies, which typically offered staid accounts of Washington’s public service alongside portraits of the deceased president, Washington was mythologized in the early nineteenth century as a unifying figure naturally suited to represent the whole American polity (in direct contradiction to the fractious reality of his two presidential terms). The Spangler broadside offers a warped version of that ideal template: the image of Spangler is not a staid formal portrait but a caricature, and the text gives an account not of his fitness to represent the electorate but of his unsuitability for elected office. Through this allusion, the broadside casts Spangler as the caricatured inversion of the electoral ideals guarding Washington’s revolutionary legacy of resistance to arbitrary power.

However, the phrase through which the broadside does so – “by George” – also alludes to an exclamatory idiom used to invoke God and, by extension, a stable, divinely ordained natural order. That invocation sits uneasily with the broadside’s depiction of Spangler as corrupt and unsuited for representative office on account of his willingness to transgress the class, racial, and social boundaries that ordered Pennsylvania society. In one sense, within the context of the broadside, the exclamation can be read as highlighting Spangler’s refusal to respect that order. After all, his adoption of an ethnic German dialect and, especially, his fathering of a mulatto child would be seen as monstrously unnatural by many of his family’s upper-class, ethnically-English peers. In another sense, though, the fact that Spangler and other Americans regularly did such things even though they were scandalously pointed to the artifice of a social and political order premised on class, racial, and ethnic categories whose bounds were regularly

violated. From this perspective, the broadside's "outline" of Spangler's "general character," which is how it terms its depiction of the candidate, occupies a position parallel to that of LeBrun's physiognomic heads, the intermediate images in Lavater's frog-Apollo series, and the non-European heads positioned between the apes and Apollo in Camper's images. Spangler's actions point to the existence of a world full of gradients and blurred distinctions, in which social and racial categories often taken as self-evidently natural, stable, and ordained by God are in fact mutable creations of human perception. As such, a natural world in which "by George" names both Spangler and God simultaneously is one in which two irreconcilable visions of empiricism unstably coexist: one that presumes the existence of fixed, well-defined, and divinely sanctioned natural categories, and another in which such categories are human artifices projected onto ambiguous hybridity and gradients. In this world, the ideal of an electoral order guaranteed by natural categories remains, but it is perpetually threatened by the practical difficulties of establishing a self-evident distinction between empirical truth and unnatural distortion.

Within the early United States, the stakes of this indeterminacy redounded far beyond individual electoral races. Indeed, the Spangler broadside hints at its troubling implications for the American electoral system as a whole when it insists that "none but [those who]. . . wish to throw a burlesque on the Legislature can vote for" Spangler. In doing so, the broadside associates Spangler's potential election with a genre, "burlesque," that Fielding had contended was the written corollary to "caricatura painting." As such, it implies that seating Spangler in the State Assembly would produce a caricature of electoral representation more generally. Underpinning this assertion was an aesthetic logic that held legitimate electoral representation required there be a self-evident distinction between the character sketch's empiricist embrace of natural categories and caricature's distortion of them. Consequently, to allow a man like Spangler, who had transgressed and undermined that order, to hold office would not merely allow a corrupt, local combination to gain power. Rather, electing Spangler would corrupt the American electoral system as a whole by eroding the very premise on which rested the notion that electoral representation could protect against arbitrary power: an empiricist belief in natural categories and self-evident "line[s] of distinction" between them.

Yet, opposing the election of a candidate like Spangler could also erode such empiricist beliefs. As demonstrated by the Spangler broadside's careful catalogue of his transgressions of a supposedly natural order, campaign materials' empiricist commitment to "outlin[ing]" a corrupt candidate's "general character" sometimes demanded attention to gradients and hybridity that destabilized empiricist efforts at categorization. Consequently, accurately representing a candidate like Spangler could entail creating a character sketch that was indistinguishable from caricature. Such a caricatured sketch might indeed succeed in convincing voters and hasten the immediate goals of undermining the electoral combination that supported the offensive candidate, ensuring he did not further corrupt the United States' system of electoral representation by gaining an official place within it. However, the cost of achieving these goals through campaign materials that relied on such monstrous representation was to expose the instability of an electoral representation premised on self-evident "line[s] of distinction" – between



character and caricature, as well as between species, races, and social groups – that did not actually exist.

In this sense, the Spangler broadside encapsulated the uneasily irresolute mode of perception demanded by an early American electoral culture in which the prospect of electoral combinations gaining power seemed an existential threat to the United States electoral system. Allowing the election of a candidate like Spangler risked the metaphorical return of another George, King George III, who embodied the arbitrary and tyrannical power of the British monarchy. But so, too, did the broadside's efforts to establish Spangler's illegitimacy, since they undermined the ostensibly self-evident aesthetic premises on which the very notion of electoral legitimacy relied. For Americans uncertain about how to recognize electoral combinations, but nevertheless deeply anxious that they would recreate the sort of arbitrary political power against which colonists had rebelled, accepting at face value the assertions of self-evidence implicit in campaign literature's visual metaphors seemed to offer a way out of this double bind. Such acceptance, though, required refraining from examining too closely the validity of the "line[s] of distinction" those metaphors sought to establish.

Sustaining an American electoral system premised on ostensibly natural "line[s] of distinction" that could not withstand close scrutiny were ambiguous equivalencies, rooted in eighteenth-century theorizations of the character sketch, between visual, verbal, and electoral representation. Gally, for instance, describes written representation in terms of "strokes," which writers must carefully "draw" in order to represent their subjects' features in a manner true to what "Nature it self has mark'd out." He elaborates:

Since every Feature must be drawn exactly to the Life, great Care must be taken, that the Strokes not be too faint, nor yet too strong[.] . . . [And] since every perfect Stroke ought to be a distinct Representation of a particular Feature, Matters shou'd be so order'd, that every perfect Sentence may contain a perfect Thought, and every perfect Thought may represent one feature.<sup>107</sup>

The analogizing of written phrases to "strokes," the assertion that each of these "strokes" should represent a single "Feature," and the suggestion that, like the markings of a pen or pencil, such strokes could be "faint" or "strong" lends written character sketches an aura of visual immediacy and precision. However, the self-evidence and empiricism implied by this aura belies the confusion inherent to the analogy itself. What, for instance, constitutes a perfect stroke in either drawing or writing? What makes a sentence of text and a line of ink equivalent? And why, in either case, would perfection entail representing a single feature, especially when in practice both images and text depend on "strokes" that vary widely in length and complexity?

Early American campaign literature's visual metaphors, which extended such ambiguous equivalencies to electoral representation, contained the uneasy irresolution attendant to an electoral system premised on "line[s] of distinction" whose relationships to a natural order could not be stabilized. Such metaphors allowed campaigns to invoke "line[s] of distinction" that could not be examined any more closely than Gally's "strokes" could. Such lines evinced an aura of visual immediacy in the same way that

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<sup>107</sup> Gally, "Critical Essay," 38.

Gally's "faint" or "strong" strokes did, but because they were not actual images they could not be subjected to the same sort of visual scrutiny as could, for example, the central line that promises but largely fails to stably divide character sketch from caricature in Hogarth's drawing. Such inscrutable "line[s] of distinction" were key to containing fears about electoral combinations in the early United States. Created through ambiguous analogies between text, image, and electoral representation, these lines guarded the legitimacy of an electoral system in which there was no consensus on how to recognize self-evidently unnatural representation.

However, an electoral system premised on such indistinguishable lines was, inevitably, riddled with anxiety that, while Americans took such lines as self-evident, they might prove not to be, as Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) shows. In that story, Rip Van Winkle awakens from a decades-long drunken sleep in the Catskill Mountains to find that he is no longer "a subject of His Majesty George the Third" but a "free citizen of the United States."<sup>108</sup> This confusing homecoming takes place in the midst of an election, the first evidence of which Rip encounters in "a lean bilious-looking fellow, with his pocket full of handbills, . . . haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens – elections – members of congress – liberty Bunker's hill – [and] heroes of seventy-six." Soon strangers begin prodding an uncomprehending Rip to establish his personal relationship to such "line[s] of distinction" by, for example, having him declare "whether he was Federal or Democrat." Rip's confused response that he is "a loyal subject of the King, God bless him!" nearly provokes violence from voters, who take the statement as a "tory[']s" rejection of the United States' electoral legitimacy.<sup>109</sup>

The potential crisis caused by the sudden transportation of a pre-Revolutionary British subject into the midst of America's unfolding electoral scene is diffused by Rip's disinterest in politics. Freed from his now-deceased wife's "petticoat . . . tyranny" and caught up on the events he has missed, Rip is content to spend the rest of his days in quiet comfort and to stay out of the early nineteenth-century electoral fray.<sup>110</sup> The resulting depiction of Rip's – and the United States' – transition from monarchy to electoral representation is, at first glance, a gentle but clearly defined one. Rip has slept through the Revolution and has consequently not witnessed the tumultuous pangs of the American people's transformation from subjects of King George III's arbitrary power to empowered electorate. But Rip perceives as self-evident that consensus on how political legitimacy is conferred and, with it, "[t]he very character of the [American] people seem [to have] changed" in his absence.<sup>111</sup>

Yet, the story's depiction of the first thing Rip recognizes – the sign at his old tavern – troubles this sense of a cleanly delineated transition to legitimate electoral representation. On the sign is "the ruby face of King George, under which [Rip] had smoked so many a peaceful pipe." As the narration notes, "even this [image] was singularly changed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held

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<sup>108</sup> Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle," 1819, in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1822), 88.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, 88.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, 78.

in the hand instead of a scepter, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON.”<sup>112</sup> What is self-evident to Rip is not the significance of the visual changes that are supposed to transform a monarch into a revolutionary. Rather, for Rip, the sign persists in representing the rejected British monarch. The visage on the sign, in other words, has become a hybridized “bi-George,” still recognizable as the king against whom Americans fought the Revolutionary War, but also ostensibly transformed into a representation of the general and president who was the early nineteenth century’s most powerful symbol of the American electoral system’s integrity.

Distilled by and contained within Irving’s “bi-George” is an uneasy mode of perception, in which character is in the eye of the beholder and what is self-evident coexists unstably with what is self-evidently its opposite. While the story plays on this ambiguity and Rip’s resulting incomprehension for laughs, its depiction nevertheless hints at the troubling irresolution that permeated an American electoral system in which legitimacy rested on “line[s] of distinction” that could not be visually scrutinized. The crowd of voters behave with certainty that there is a clear and self-evident “line of distinction” separating their elected representative government from the arbitrary rule Americans experienced under Britain’s monarchy. However, Rip’s instant recognition of King George III’s face on the sign suggests otherwise. Indeed, the same transformation that has produced the clear change Rip recognizes in the American people has also blurred the sign’s representations of King George III’s and Washington’s characters, leaving unclear where the former ends and the latter begins. The result is an uneasy one: an image whose ostensible celebration of the United States’ electoral legitimacy is one in the same with, and perhaps indistinguishable from, a representation of America’s emblem of arbitrary power.

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, 78.

## Chapter 4: The Gerry-Mander and the Mapping of Character

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the borders that divided U.S. states from one another were all relatively new, but the degree and quality of their newness varied. The most entrenched borders described state boundaries along the eastern seaboard. Typically dating back to colonial land grants, these had coincided with political divisions and lived settlement for so long that they had taken on an aura of permanency. West of the Appalachians, though, state borders – even those articulated by early colonial charters – had yet to achieve such rootedness. Some were actively contested as surveys brought them into conflict either with each other or with lived patterns of settlement. Others were mere projections, created as Congress carved up and organized new, and in some cases only partially explored, Ohio Valley territory into future states.<sup>113</sup>

Inextricably intertwined with this unfinished cartographical project were the United States' efforts to implement the electoral representation on which its legitimacy rested. After all, state borders were – and are – also electoral borders. The admission of any new state to the Union carried with it a new voting population, as well as two new senators and at least one new congressman. Consequently, when Congress debated how to how to divide existing territory, those debates were shaped by fears and hopes – often made explicit – about how states created by those borders would affect future electoral outcomes. Moreover, because Congress itself was an elected body, this process of future electoral border drawing was itself electorally mediated. Partisan and sectional interests regularly clashed over how a particular territory should be subdivided into future states, whether or not a given territory's petition for statehood should be accepted by Congress, and on what terms a given state should be admitted to the Union. As a result, concerns regarding the partition of territory into future states and the admission of new states often featured in the electoral races of not only congressmen, senators, and presidents but also of state legislatures. State-level decisions about local electoral maps and election processes could sway the outcomes of close national legislative races and, by affecting the selection of presidential electors, even influence presidential elections.<sup>114</sup>

This chapter examines how this ongoing process of state and local boundary drawing interacted with a framework for cartographical representation rooted in the belief that character could be mapped in order to produce a new electoral concept: the gerrymander. Key to the term's rapid spread and cultural persistence, despite the difficulties, then and now, in arriving at a stable definition for it, was how its fusion of character sketch, cartography, and natural science distilled the unease at the core of the early American electoral imagination. By caricaturing a map of the Essex South electoral

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<sup>113</sup> For a complete history of the United States' national, state, and township boundaries, see Bill Hubbard Jr., *American Boundaries: The Nation, the States, the Rectangular Survey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>114</sup> For an overview of such conflicts, see Hubbard, *American Boundaries*, 123-166. Before the Civil War, the vast majority of partisan and regional conflicts over future electoral boundaries centered around slavery's expansion or restriction. Key legislative decisions related to the creation of new electoral boundaries included the Compromise of 1820, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Missouri Compromise, all of which became issues of importance in state and national electoral races.

district as a lizard-like monster, the 1812 Gerry-Mander broadside imported into early U.S. cartography the notion that there was a clear “line of distinction” between electoral maps that sketched the polity’s true nature and those that instead unnaturally distorted it. However, because this theoretical line could not be stably visualized or mapped, in practice the term “gerrymander” served not to stabilize the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate electoral boundaries but rather to highlight the persistent instability that suffused and enduring doubts about legitimacy of the American electoral map. At the root of this abiding unease was the curious and unstable mode of electoral perception that congealed as Americans borrowed from theories of representation developed by writers and visual artists to imagine how the new American electoral system might map the character of the American polity. In this mode of perception, what seemed to be self-evidently natural electoral boundaries that accurately sketched the polity’s character threatened perpetually to resolve themselves into the caricatured outlines of unnatural monsters.

By situating early uses of the term “gerrymander” within this uneasy representational framework, this chapter challenges work by historians, political scientists, and geographers that has treated the politics of electoral boundary drawing as separable from the rich literary and artistic context shaping how early Americans understood the notion of representation itself.<sup>115</sup> Such politics, the chapter shows, was inextricable from the uneasy entailments between written, visual, electoral, and cartographic representation that structured how Americans evaluated the legitimacy of electoral boundaries. In exposing these entailments, this chapter demonstrates that the notion of gerrymandering cannot be adequately explained through attention to local district boundaries or vote totals alone. Rather, gerrymandering can be understood only within a wider representational framework in which fraught efforts to map the self-evident character of the American electorate were indelibly linked to presumed “line[s] of distinction” whose confounding syntheses of the verbal, the visual, and the electoral could only sometimes be rendered clearly and stably on the page.

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<sup>115</sup> To date, study of early American electoral cartography has largely been siloed within academic disciplines. Political historians like Griffith and Engstrom have tended to focus discussions of gerrymandering on partisan politics and vote totals and rarely engage the aesthetic assumptions or cartographical practices involved in boundary drawing. Likewise, discussions of boundary-making at the territory and state level tend to be subsumed within broader accounts of competing regional and sectional interests, especially slavery. Geographers have instead largely focused on efforts to survey land and represent its boundaries and natural features with increasing precision, though recently works, such as Susan Schulten’s *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), discuss how cartographical representations helped to construct a national consciousness in the early United States. Literary critics have engaged with this scholarship and early American map-making only in limited, piecemeal fashion, and none have linked the aesthetic principles of the character sketch, whether visual or verbal, to American cartography. As a result, no body of scholarship has yet attended to the full aesthetic, political, and cartographical context for the Gerry-mander broadsides or discussed broader implications for early American electoral politics of the ways sketched, written, electoral, and cartographical representations informed one another in the early United States.

From the founding onward, U.S. political discourse treated as self-evident the assumption that the cartographical lines with which the Continental Congress and, later, the U.S. Congress divided unsettled territory would indelibly shape the future electorate's character. Take, for example, Thomas Jefferson's 1784 Land Ordinance, which, as Jefferson drafted it, proposed to divide the land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi into twelve evenly sized rectangular states. The plan and its accompanying map (Figure 8), with its clean lines and right angles, was an effort to impose Enlightenment ideals on the American landscape through cartographical aesthetics. The gridded order Jefferson's map would have brought to the United States' political geography was animated by the Enlightenment drive toward rational organization and classification of the natural world that likewise fueled that Jefferson's lifelong interest in natural science and systematizing weights and measures. Its clean grid, which would immediately open the entire Ohio Valley for settlement but not slavery, made space for more than a dozen states replete with wide tracts that could support generations of Jefferson's idealized, self-sufficient yeoman farmers – and, with them, the American Republic's ideals.<sup>116</sup> In short, through cartographic representation and its material consequences, Jefferson's draft ordinance and map promised to shape the character of the United States' future electorate and electoral map according to the aesthetic and political ideals that Jefferson believed would ensure the United States' government's continuing legitimacy.<sup>117</sup>

Jefferson's cartographical vision was quickly superseded by the Land Ordinance of 1785 and then the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, but his draft of the Land Ordinance of 1784 set the terms for how Americans would conceive of the relationship between the future character of their electorate and their nation's evolving cartography. First, the ordinance made clear that Congress's negotiation of new state boundaries in the territory between the Eastern seaboard and the Mississippi could not be separated from the anticipated use of the land or, by extension, the characters of either its inhabitants or the future American polity.<sup>118</sup> Second, the ordinance's reception by the Continental Congress made clear that, from the United States' inception, such cartographical questions were widely understood as future electoral issues. Debate around the Land Ordinance of 1784, as well as the two that quickly followed, was shaped by the pressing questions about electoral cartography: How would slavery's expansion or restriction tip the tenuous

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<sup>116</sup> As passed, the Ordinance allowed territories to petition for statehood once they had a mere 20,000 residents, incentivizing rapid settlement on large tracts of land, and Jefferson's draft version abolished slavery in these new states as well. As such, its terms would have gone a long way toward ensuring that the Ohio Valley was quickly populated with the self-sufficient yeoman farmers Jefferson idealized as key to the American Republic's sustainability.

<sup>117</sup> See Hubbard, *American Boundaries*, 106-111 for details of Jefferson's plan.

<sup>118</sup> Slavery was the biggest driver of these cartographical politics. During the United States' first five decades, nearly every Congressional act dealing with the western territories involved efforts to limit or incentivize slavery's westward expansion, which in either case would, it was widely believed, indelibly shape the future character of the United States and its people. But slavery was hardly the only land use issue to raise such questions. Both state size and minimum parcel size on offer from the Federal Land Office were likewise referenced in Congressional debates as likely to permanently shape the character of who settled in a given territory. See Hubbard, *American Boundaries*, 101-167, 183-194.



Figure 8: Map prepared by John Hartley, c. 1784. Based on Thomas Jefferson's *Land Ordinance of 1784*.

balance between free and slave states? and, Would the eastern seaboard states retain their dominance as a handful of large, sparsely populated western states entered the union, or would small, numerous western states rapidly overwhelm the eastern states' influence in the national legislature? Third, this cartographical politics was always, at least partly, aesthetic not only because cartographical aesthetics was inseparable from electoral practicalities – for example, large territories meant fewer new western states – but also because, as Jefferson's map demonstrated, maps could visually project a political ideal onto territory whose boundaries and population were still in flux.

Key to how cartographical aesthetics interacted with the politics of acquiring and dividing up new territory was the widely held assumption that the United States' future state and national boundaries should correspond to “natural” limits, including not solely the natural geographic features like rivers and mountain ranges, but also the natural outlines of the American polity's character. This way of thinking dated back to

Revolutionary discourse, especially Thomas Paine’s claim in “Common Sense” (1775-6) that “there is something absurd, in supposing a continent [like America] to be perpetually governed by an island” such as Britain.<sup>119</sup> It likewise informed discussions of U.S. expansion in the early Republic, especially Jefferson’s bids for a culturally and racially homogenous United States bounded by the Atlantic in the east and the Mississippi to the west and, later, an “empire of liberty” stretching from Canada to Cuba.<sup>120</sup> As U.S. territory expanded, this discourse came to be embedded in a growing body of natural scientific writing. Following the example of Jefferson’s *Notes*, which begins its natural history with an effort to describe the colony of Virginia’s political boundaries, these works fused catalogues of plant and animal life with cartographical surveys of current and potential U.S. territories that highlighted those territories’ potential to cultivate new generations of Republican inhabitants.<sup>121</sup> By the early nineteenth century, the notion that that the United States’ natural cartographical bounds outlined its polity’s character had become thoroughly embedded in popular and political culture – and, especially, within the atlases that proliferated in the early Republic. Testifying to its popularity were works like the “Eagle Map” (Figure 9), which was both sold by subscription and included in *Rudiments of national knowledge, presented to the youth of the United States, and to enquiring foreigners* (1833).<sup>122</sup>

As works like *Rudiments of national knowledge* demonstrate, this conception of the United States’ natural cartography relied on the same aesthetic premises, grounded in eighteenth-century theories of the character sketch, that had shaped early American campaign literature’s written sketches of candidates’ characters. For example, in making the case for the “Eagle Map,” the youth atlas highlights the “correspondence” between the “lines of latitude and longitude” that define the United States’ borders and “the figure of the eagle,” which it points out “was the figure adopted by our national councils” as “representative of national liberty and national independence.” In order to bolster its case that this correspondence is meaningful, the text asserts that “no variation from the common principles of constructing maps [is] required to place [the eagle] in its natural position. In doing so, the text suggests the United States’ aquiline outline naturally describes its “fierce” character. In other words, through the map’s representation of the United States’ boundaries, the eagle’s natural essence as a species, the map’s natural outlines, and the United States’ natural character all become reciprocally entailed.<sup>123</sup>

This account of the Eagle Map’s “usefulness and moral bearing” demonstrates how these reciprocal entailments, which collapsed the distinction between character

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<sup>119</sup> Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” 1775-6, in Mark Philp, ed., *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Monticello, Apr, 27, 1809. On multiple occasions, Jefferson held that neither natives (nor slaves or any sizable population of free blacks) was compatible with such an “empire of liberty” and that the United States would likely have to drive natives “beyond the Mississippi.” See, for example, Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, Monticello, Aug, 28, 1807.

<sup>121</sup> See Robert Lawson-Peebles, *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 64-73.

<sup>122</sup> *Rudiments of national knowledge, presented to the youth of the United States, and to enquiring foreigners. By a Citizen of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1833), 244-48.

<sup>123</sup> *Rudiments*, 244-6.



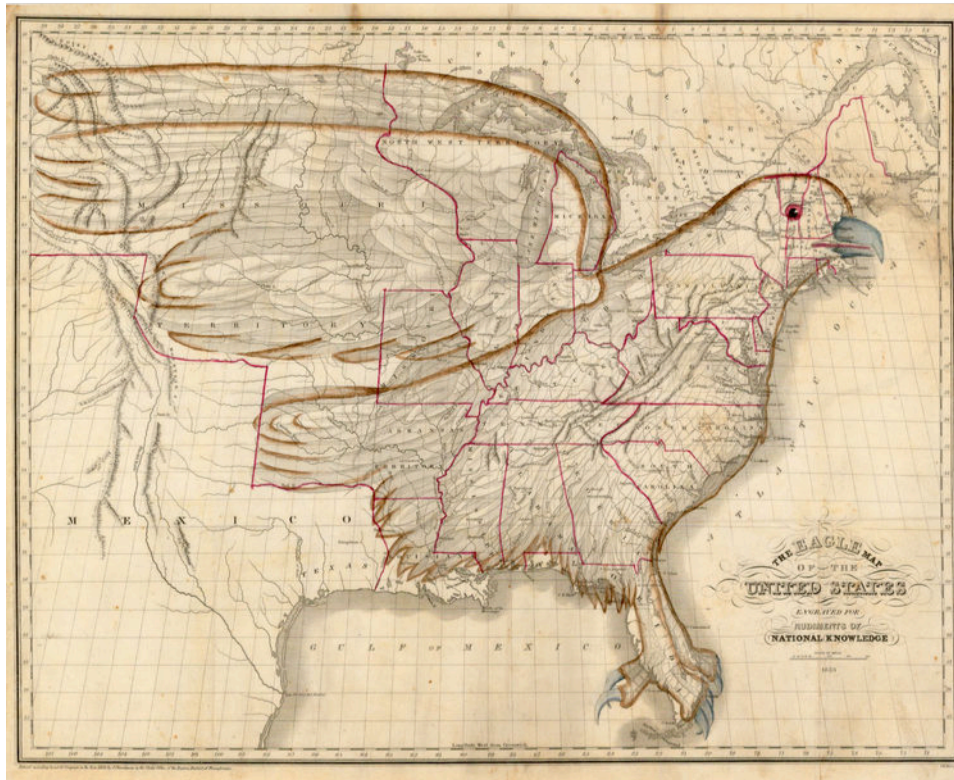


Figure 9: “The Eagle Map of the United States,” by J. Churchman. From *Rudiments of national knowledge, presented to the youth of the United States*. Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1833.

sketch and cartography, drew on and further developed the aesthetic principles that had shaped eighteenth-century discourse around the character sketch. In *Rudiments*' explanation of the Eagle Map, moral and geographic bearings become one and the same, as the boundary lines that describe the United States' borders also come to be taken as describing that polity's character – in particular its “fierce” commitment to the Revolution's ideals of “national liberty and independence.” Mediating that correspondence is a notion of naturalness that bridges character sketch, physiognomy, and natural scientific empiricism. As with the accounts of speciation in Linnaeus, Buffon, and Jefferson, *Rudiments*' description of the map presumes that, while members of particular species vary somewhat, that species has an essential character – in the eagle's case, fierceness – and that, as Jefferson put it, such variation does not exceed that essence's “natural bounds.” Likewise mediating that correspondence was the assumption, developed by physiognomists like LeBrun and Lavater, that resemblance to a given species revealed character traits. In much the same way that angular features and a prominent nose reveal the fierce character of the subject of LeBrun's “Eagle's Head” sketch, the aquiline outline of the United States reveals its polity's character. Emerging from this depiction of the Eagle Map is an account of the “common principles of constructing maps” that in every important matter remains consistent with the empiricist principles articulated by eighteenth-century theorists of the character sketch. In each case,

empirically sound representations of a given entity's natural essence are tied to clean outlines that promise to render that essence's character self-evident.

*Rudiments'* description of the Eagle Map also shows how such efforts to map political character drew upon the notion, developed in early American campaign literature, that illegitimate electoral combinations created monstrous distortions of the polity that threatened to deform the United States' natural borders. The text asserts that, when looking at the map, "intelligent readers" reflecting on the associations between "visible objects," "moral effects," and "ideas of order or deformity," will perceive that:

If, from a selfish, or misguided policy, the citizens of any one state, should propose to separate their interests from the interests of the Union, and claim a right to withdraw from the general connexion, the ugly chasm which would be produced by carrying their design into effect, would be aptly represented by supposing a line of separation drawn round the seceding state, and admitting its whole internal declinations, and even its very name, to be blotted out from the eagle map of the United States . . . and then observing the distortion which would be thus effected, in the beautiful figure before us. Thus, might now a moral repugnance be strengthened, against the open or insidious attempts, of artful, designing men . . . to attempt a disorganization of the republic?<sup>124</sup>

The passage links state-level combinations, which "separate their [political and electoral] interests from the interests of the Union," to a visual "distortion" of the "beautiful [Eagle] figure" that would leave the Eagle "deform[ed]." In doing so, the description relies on and adapts the notion that electoral combinations resulted in representation that was monstrously warped and distorted in the same way that caricature was. As the accompanying text explains, for "intelligent readers" looking at the Eagle Map, the deformation caused by any "line of separation" that disrupted or divided the United States' natural boundaries would be self-evident. So, too, would the illegitimacy of any political or electoral order premised on "citizens of any one state" treating their "interests" as "separate" from those "of the Union." In both cases, such "line[s] of separation" would offend those sensible to "ideas of order or deformity" in "moral[s]" and "visual objects" by distorting the outline of the eagle that empirically distilled and represented the character of the American polity.

However, as with the "line[s] of distinction" that supposedly separated character sketch from caricature or distinguished legitimate representation from unnatural electoral combinations, the lines through which early American cartography sought to map character staked uneasy claims to self-evidence that dissolved under close scrutiny. Take, for instance, the Eagle Map's representation of Maine, whose northern half is not contained within the eagle figure. The text excuses this misalignment between the United States' borders and the eagle's outline with the explanation that "The citizens of Maine, it is presumed, will not be offended at the impossibility of comprehending their department in the Union, within the regular form of the figure, when we assign to it the appellation of the cap of liberty, attached to the eagle's head." To present-day readers, the explanation is unpersuasive, both visually and logically. Maine looks nothing like a hat – and if it did

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<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, 245-6.

the addition of the hat to the eagle's figure would undercut that figure's fierce, dignified character. As such, the text's discussion of Maine seems to actively undermine the work's larger assertion that the United States' natural character is reified through the "correspondence" between the eagle's outlines and the "lines of latitude and longitude."

Yet *Rudiments'* insistence, despite Maine's troubling anomaly, on the self-evident correspondence between the eagle's natural outline and the United States' borders distills how the cartographic representation of character in early American electoral maps depended as much on conceptual and metaphorical as on literal, visually scrutable "line[s] of distinction." The matter of which cartographic lines were, for example, understood as natural borders of, distortions to, or merely extraneous marks surrounding the eagle's figure could not be separated from the matter of what traits constituted the eagle species and how those traits were imagined to represent the American polity's character. *Rudiments'* text could frame Maine's "liberty cap" as of a piece with the eagle's figure because its audience already understood Maine as integral to the United States and therefore also integral to the eagle figure that outlined the American polity's "moral bearings." In other words, in Maine's case, the conceptual lines that bounded the American polity and wrought the aesthetic discourse concerning the representation of character crucially shaped the perception of the visual lines on the Eagle Map despite the places where the eagle's outline and the map of the United States' borders did not correspond.

Yet, because such correspondences between conceptual, political, and aesthetic "line[s] of distinction" were presumed to be self-evident, even when they were actually in tension, their commingling in early American electoral history was inevitably uneasy. The result of such efforts to map the character of the American polity was an inherently unstable fusion of visibly drawn boundary lines with conceptual and metaphorical "line[s] of distinction" that resisted visual scrutiny. The result was an aesthetic, political, and cartographic framework whose promise of self-evidence perpetually threatened to dissolve, exposing aesthetic distortion and political illegitimacy, if examined too closely. In short, the Eagle Map exemplified a cartographical discourse in which the American polity's character could be mapped, but only uneasily – and only by insisting on the self-evident correspondence of visual, conceptual, and political lines that in practice was anything but.

The Gerrymander broadside was published in 1812, just as these efforts to map character were coming into their own. The broadside relied on their aesthetic framework in order to delegitimize the Essex South electoral district's monstrous caricature of the electoral map. Specifically, in the image the lines that mark the district's northern and eastern boundaries become not only cartographic borders but also the outlines of the neck and body of a lizard-like monster (Figure 10). A few additional strokes transform its far northeastern township into a fearsome head with a forked tongue and its southeastern townships into clawed feet. Likewise, to the western border have been added wings, as though the electoral district were also a dragon or mythical monster. These embellishments give cartographical force to the distinction established by early American campaign literature between empiricist representation and unnatural electoral combinations. Through this fusion of cartography and caricature, the broadside casts the



**Figure 10: Gerry-mander image from “The Gerry-Mander. A New Species of Monster Which Appeared in the District Essex South.”** Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

electoral map drawn by Massachusetts Republicans as self-evidently illegitimate – a monstrous distortion of the district’s natural boundaries.

The broadside reinforces this visual representation of how the district’s borders have been unnaturally distorted with a textual account that draws on the conventions of natural science to depict the district as a cartographical monster. Specifically, the broadside offers an extensive description of how the “the learned Doctor Watergruel[,] who is famous for peeping under the skirts of nature,” classified this new member of the “Lizard species.” According to the broadside, in establishing that “this monster [was] a genuine Salamander, though by no means perfect in all its members[,]” Dr. Watergruel relied a number of different “characteristic[s]”: its “ferocity,” its need for “a potent degree of heat” in order to reproduce, and its “dislike and almost hydrophobic antipathy . . . for sea salt.” Watergruel’s scientific study attributes the Gerry-mander’s birth and its development of these natural characteristics – especially those associated with “inflammation and acrimony” – to “the many fiery ebullitions of party spirit, . . . explosions of democratic wrath[,] and fulminations of gubernatorial vengeance within the year past” by Governor Eldridge Gerry and his Republican Party. In doing so, the broadside, together with its sequel, *The Natural and Political History of the Gerry-*



*Mander*, extends to electoral cartography the aesthetic and political framework through which early American campaign literature associated illegitimate electoral combinations with unnatural and monstrous caricature. In the Gerry-mander broadsides, electoral borders outline a self-evidently unnatural creature whose aesthetic and political monstrousness can be scientifically catalogued and classified.

The power of the term “gerrymander” lay in this promise that electoral cartography operated within an aesthetic and political framework that offered a clear and self-evident “line of distinction” between legitimate representation and unnatural electoral distortion. As the term was used in both the initial broadsides and subsequent articles, numerical indices of actual electoral distortion, such as vote totals, were secondary to aesthetic commentary on how natural district boundaries had been distorted at the behest of partisan combinations. For instance, a first version of the Gerry-mander broadside relied entirely on the cartographic caricature and accompanying description of the Gerry-mander’s natural scientific classification to make its case for the Essex South district’s illegitimacy. And, while the later version (Figure 11) stated that – despite Federalists’ slim majority in the state overall – Massachusetts now had “29 democratic[-Republican] and 11 federal” state senators, the visual and textual emphasis remained on the monstrous map and the partisan climate that had warped it. News articles that denounced “new” Gerry-manders in Massachusetts and elsewhere between 1812 and 1820 show a similar reluctance to highlight hard vote tallies. Often, they simply asserted the existence of these Gerry-manders as self-evident fact and did not mention vote counts at all. And those articles that did report voting numbers nevertheless focused primarily on the aesthetics of “irregular lines” with which district borders “mutilate” towns and counties, allowing new districts to “swallow,” “amputate,” or “dislocate” local voting blocs.<sup>125</sup> In short, the term Gerry-mander was coined and spread with the understanding that Gerry-manders were identified not primarily through analysis of the electoral vote but instead by districts’ monstrously unnatural and self-evidently distorted outlines.

However, because this understanding relied on a framework for mapping character that uneasily entangled visible cartographic lines with conceptual “line[s] of distinction,” its promise that legitimate electoral boundaries could be readily distinguished from unnatural deformations did not sit easily with the lines on electoral maps. The Gerry-mander image itself is a striking example of this difficulty of reconciling an uneasy aesthetic and political framework with the cartographic lines on the page. For example, while the broadside emphasized the electorally distorting effects of how the redistricting plan “divided” “Essex County,” the line along which that division took place – the Merrimack river – was in fact a natural boundary of the sort frequently celebrated in atlases and natural histories. If a river marks the line that separates the new district from its legitimate predecessor and outlines the Gerry-Mander’s neck, how, then, could the new district’s monstrous electoral distortion be reconciled with the unquestionable naturalness of the dividing line’s origin? And how could a self-evident

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<sup>125</sup> [No Headline], *National Aegis* (Worcester), July 27, 1814: 2; “Communication. A Young Gerry-mander,” *Columbian Centinel*, published as *Columbian Centinel American Federalist* (Boston), March 17, 1824: 1.

# Natural and Political History OF THE GERRY-MANDER! IN TWO CHAPTERS.....WITH CUTS.

"Now I appeal to each bye-stander, If this is not a SALAMANDER." Dean Swift.

## CHAP. I.....NATURAL HISTORY.

As that we can learn of the natural history of this remarkable animal, is contained in the following formal treatise, published in the newspapers of March, 1812, established by a drawing, which is pronounced by all competent judges, to be a most accurate likeness.



The horrid Mander of which this drawing is a correct representation, appeared in the County of Essex, during the last session of the Legislature. Various and manifold have been the speculations and conjectures, among learned naturalists respecting the genus and origin of this astonishing production. Some believe it to be the real *Basilisk*, a creature which had been supposed to exist only in the poet's imagination. Others pronounce it the *Serpens Monophthalmus* of Pliny, or single-eyed serpent of romance, which flourished in the dark ages, and has since hitherto to assist the knight Some think it the great Red Dragon, or Barren's *Apollinaris* or the *Monstrous Heronides* of Virgil, and all believe it a creature of infernal origin, both from its aspect, and from the circumstance of its birth.

But the learned Doctor Watergrub who is famous for peeping under the skirts of nature, has decided that it belongs to the Salamander tribe, and gives many plausible reasons for this opinion. He says though the Devil himself must undoubtedly have been concerned, either directly or indirectly in the production of this monster, yet many powerful causes must have concurred to give it existence, amongst which must be reckoned the present combustible and venomous state of affairs. There have been, says the Doctor, many fiery shillings of party spirit, many explosions of democratic wrath and indignation of gubernatorial vengeance within the year past, which would naturally produce an uncommon degree of inflammation and ardour in the body politic. But as the Salamander cannot be generated except in the most moist degree of heat, he thinks these malignant causes, could not alone have produced such diabolical effects. He therefore ascribes the real birth and material existence of this monster, in all its horrors, to the alarm which his Excellency the Governor and his friends experienced last session, while they were under the influence of the Dog-ear and the Comet—and while his Excellency was pregnant with his last speech, his libellous messages, and a numerous litter of new judges and other animals, of which he has since breathing fire with fire-breaths, arrows and death; (if his proclamation is to be credited) which was sent to him by some mysterious wight, probably some rogue of his own party, to try the strength of his Excellency's mind. Now his Excellency being somewhat like a tinder-box, and his party very liable to take fire, they must of course have been thrown into a most fearful panic, and extremely dangerous to persons in their situation, and calculated to produce the most disastrous effects upon their unborn progeny.

From these premises the suspicious Doctor most solemnly avers there can be no doubt that this monster is a genuine Salamander, though by no means perfect in all its members; a circumstance however which goes far to prove its illegitimacy. But as this creature has been engendered and brought forth under the salubrious auspices, he proposes that a name should be given to it, expressive of its genus, at the same time conveying an elegant and very appropriate compliment to his Excellency the Governor, who is known to be the zealous patron and promoter of whatever is new, Excellent and erratic, especially of domestic growth and manufacture. For these reasons and other valuable considerations, the Doctor has decreed that this monster shall be denominated

**GERRY-MANDER!!**

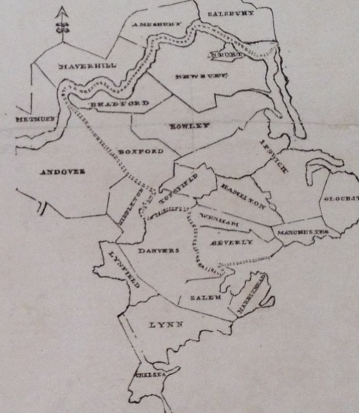
## CHAP. II.....POLITICAL HISTORY.

From what has been said in the foregoing chapter, of this animal, the reader may be inclined to believe that it is altogether a fabulous being—a mere creature of poetic fancy, or of pagan mythology. Not so, gentle reader. It is certain that it has had a positive existence—that it owed its birth to the violence of political faction—and that during the period of its existence, it had a very powerful influence in the politics of this Commonwealth.

It will be known that the two political parties in Massachusetts have been for many years nearly equally divided, the balance however generally inclining to the federal side. For six consecutive years previous to the year of the Gerry-Mander, the representation of the parties in the Senate, as chosen by the people, was divided in the following manner. The exact districts were as equally divided, that no choice could be made by the people, and the vacancies were filled according to the political character of the other branch of the Legislature.

YEARS.	FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC.	VACANCIES.
1806.	19	21
1807.	23	18
1808.	22	18
1809.	20	19
1810.	18	21

In the year 1811 both the branches of the Legislature, and the Governor, were, with the exception of a single year, for the first time, democratic; but the experience of past years taught the prevailing party, that the success of their power was extremely precarious, and that the smallest quieting measure would be sufficient, from the superiority of talents on the other side, to re-establish the balance in all future years. It was the desired object of securing the continuance of the present majority, without any division of counties. In view of this object, the Legislature divided the State into two equal senatorial districts in such a manner as to present the division of the greatest number of democratic members. They not only divided counties to effect their object in opposition to the powerful arguments of the federal members, but they also divided the counties of Essex and Worcester in a manner which showed that all constructive arguments of equity were disregarded, and that the only object was to form a democratic district from each of these federal counties. This will appear from the following plan of the two Essex Districts, in which the double dotted lines show the boundaries of the districts as they were formed by the districting law of 1811, commonly called the Gerry-Mander law.



In the plan given above of the Essex county district, authorized by law to choose three Senators, while the federal towns enclosed within it formed another district to choose two, the reader will perceive all the features of the Gerry-Mander. It was the creature of the Legislature of 1811, and the design of its creation was to increase and secure the power of the democratic party in the Senate of the State.

The Gerry-Mander did not disappoint the expectations of its fond parents. The election of Senators in 1812 took place under the Gerry-Mander law, and the result was, that TWENTY SEVEN democratic, and only TWENTY FEDERAL Senators were chosen. On the same day the federal candidate for Governor was chosen by a handsome majority, and what is more remarkable, such was the malignant influence of the animal of which we are giving the history, that it required fewer democratic votes to choose the twenty nine democratic Senators, than were actually given to the federal candidates, of whom only eleven were chosen.

The whole number of votes given for Senators was 101,230, of which 51,760 were given to the federal candidates, and 49,470 for the democratic candidates, making a federal majority of 1022 votes. Yet the democratic minority, with the help of the Gerry-Mander, outvoted the federal majority, almost three to one—that is, so as to constitute a Senate of 29 democratic and 11 federal members.

The fact remains to be recorded of this monster. Thus far his career had been prosperous, and all the fond hopes of his parents and friends were gratified in his complete success. But alas for the frailty of human expectations, especially when founded on schemes of fraud and injustice. The public were indignant at the gross usurpation upon their rights; they rose in their strength, burst the chains which had been imposed upon them, and overcame the monster, notwithstanding his great power. A new districting law was passed, by which he was deprived of all political authority, and it was reported that he was dead. We have even seen an account of his funeral obsequies, but it is now, after a lapse of some years, when the apprehensions of the public have been quieted, candidly reported, that it was but an empty coffin that was followed to the tomb—that he still lives, and that it is the determination of his friends to restore him to his former power and dignity. It is to be hoped, for the reputation of the Commonwealth, that this attempt will not be successful.

This image for research purposes only  
Source: American Antiquarian Society

Figure 11: "Natural and Political History of the Gerry-mander! In Two Chapters ... With Cuts." Boston: s.n., c. 1812. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

distinction between natural borders and unnatural distortion be maintained when redrawing electoral boundaries to follow a natural border had, apparently, resulted in an electoral map that was more unnaturally monstrous and less legitimate than its predecessor?





Figure 12: Shading in the Gerry-mander image. From "The Gerry-Mander. A New Species of Monster Which Appeared in the District Essex South." Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

The shading lines inside the Gerry-mander's body likewise underscore the difficulty in maintaining any self-evident distinction between the natural and the unnatural when what makes any given line natural or unnatural depends not only on cartographical aesthetics but also on political distinctions that the map cannot directly render (Figure 12). The shading lines have the graceful, natural feel of wood grain, and their effect is to render the Gerry-mander's body an organic and natural creation. Because of these lines, the Gerry-mander as a whole takes on the same aura of naturalness that suffuses the Merrimack River's gentle curves even as, collectively, they shade the Gerry-mander's body in a way that calls attention to its unnatural monstrosity. Man-made boundary lines, by contrast, appear jarringly angular in the image. Township lines cut across the Gerry-mander's body, unnaturally dividing its torso and legs into jagged segments. Yet these man-made lines, too, confound any neat distinction between natural and unnatural electoral borders; in the redistricted electoral map, some township boundaries have no electoral significance, others mark a portion of the new, ostensibly unnatural border between the two new Essex County districts, and some correspond with the borders of Essex County itself, which according to the broadside forms a natural electoral boundary. But if visual cues about a given cartographical line's naturalness were unreliable, how, then, could legitimate electoral boundaries be aesthetically distinguished

from those that formed unnatural electoral monsters – as both the Gerry-mander broadsides and subsequent articles insisted was possible?

Shifting the focus to the other lines that establish the Essex South district's monstrousness further confuses the matter, because the lines that sketch the Gerry-mander's most definitively monstrous traits – its claws, its wings, its dragon-like beak and forked tongue – are nearly all *beyond* the borders of the district itself. They are, in other words, the sorts of unnatural distortions and exaggerations that typically defined caricature, not the empiricist character sketch. These lines, then, offered a warped representation of the new Essex South district's borders that makes it difficult to discern where exaggerated caricature ends and actual electoral boundary begins. By visually obscuring the supposedly "clear line of distinction" separating caricatured exaggeration from cartographic outlines that are true to nature, the Gerry-mander image renders visually uneasy the ostensibly self-evident distinction between legitimate electoral map and deformed, illegitimate cartographical monster. Put another way, while these caricatured extensions to and embellishments of the Essex South's electoral boundaries underscore the broadside's point that the redistricted boundaries are unnatural, they do so by visually undermining the "clear line of distinction" that divides character sketch from unnatural caricature. What emerges, then, from close scrutiny of the lines that map the Gerry-mander is not a self-evident and unambiguous division of natural representation from electoral distortion. Rather, the lines of the Gerry-mander image reveal that the promise of a self-evident distinction between legitimate and illegitimate electoral borders rests uneasily on cartographic boundaries whose maps of electoral character leave the natural and the unnatural inextricably tangled.

Subsequent uses of the term "gerrymander" likewise register the unease with which the lines on electoral maps comported with the term's promise of readily differentiating natural from unnatural electoral boundaries. One key marker of this unease was the fact that newspapers typically did not print maps of "new" Gerrymanders though they liberally used the term. As was the case with electoral pamphlets that offered written "sketches" but not images of candidates, this absence was partly a matter of printing practicalities: images were laborious and expensive to print, so newspapers only rarely invested the time and money necessary to show readers the district map in question. Still, the fact that newspapers could readily make claims that the Gerry-mander had "had a darling son" without backing up their allegations about "irregular lines" and "mutlate[d]" counties with visual representations was itself telling.<sup>126</sup> For such claims to stick, these articles suggest, all they needed was to *assert* aesthetic distortion of a natural local voting bloc. Yet these assertions, in the absence of cartographical evidence, left the notion of unnaturalness that they relied on unmoored from the actual evidence of electoral boundaries whose meaning those assertions promised to stabilize.

Moreover, even read in isolation from the electoral maps being described, the figurative language these gerrymandering accusations relied upon did not clearly establish a fixed distinction between natural and unnatural electoral borders. When newspapers described "new" gerrymander as the original Gerry-mander's "son," for

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<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*



instance, they suggested that this younger Gerrymander's formation was due not only to unnatural intervention but also, at least in part, to natural generation. Likewise, many articles ascribed to these ostensibly unnatural Gerry-manders natural bodily functions. For example, in relating the original Gerry-mander's "desperate effort to swallow of his nearest relations" and subsequent "agonizing struggles" and demise, an April 1813 article cast this ostensibly unnatural monster as subject to the mundane natural limitations placed on all creatures by their digestive systems.<sup>127</sup> These depictions of Gerry-manders as creations of and affected by natural forces were in keeping with the original broadsides' rhetoric of natural classification, which described the Gerry-mander as an unusual, even monstrous, specimen within, but nevertheless a part of, a scientifically classifiable natural order. However, all such depictions blurred the distinction between the natural and the unnatural that the gerrymander's promise to self-evidently identify "irregular," distorted, and illegitimate electoral boundaries relied upon.

Taken together, such figurative language traced the uneasy contours of an electoral imagination in which political legitimacy rested on representational aesthetics premised precariously on self-evident "line[s] of distinction." Ostensibly, these "line[s] of distinction" divided legitimate the electoral sub-group from electoral combination, the well-drawn district from the gerrymandered one, character sketch from caricature, and the natural from the unnatural. However, each of these ostensibly self-evident binaries was itself unstable. Moreover, because of the reciprocal entailments between, for instance, the distinction between character and caricature and that between the natural and the unnatural, any disturbance to one of these binaries threatened to rapidly compound the instability in the others. When, for example, the text of gerrymandering broadsides and articles relied on visual metaphors related to caricature, anything that unsettled the ostensibly self-evident distinction between character sketch and caricature in turn threatened the coherence of the entire political, aesthetic, and natural-scientific framework those broadsides and articles were created within. So too did anything that undermined the sharp separation between the natural and the unnatural underlying the aesthetic discourse around the character sketch and the political discourse the early United States was steeped in.

Yet, paradoxically, this uneasy electoral aesthetics was essential to containing partisan and sectional tensions within the early United States that threatened the coherence and integrity of the national electoral map as a whole. The divisions and recombinations of electoral groups cited in gerrymandering allegations were nearly always highly localized, at the level of counties and towns. However, these local redistrictings took place within the early United States' highly-partisan, regionally-divided political environment. Republicans viewed Federalists as a regional, New England "combination" that perpetually threatened to treacherously collude with Britain, return the United States to "monarchical" rule, or even secede altogether, as Federalists discussed at the abortive Hartford Convention. Federalists, by contrast, saw their national influence waning and slave power expanding in the Republican-leaning South in a way that threatened to permanently marginalize their electoral influence. And both parties

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<sup>127</sup> "The Great Magician's Dead," *New-Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene, NH), Apr. 17, 1813: 3.

looked on with varying degrees of trepidation as the United States' political center of gravity shifted west in a way that marginalized their interests and threatened to permanently remove them from the electoral map. At stake, many believed, was not merely the future of political power *within* the United States but rather whether the United States would continue to exist at all as a coherent entity or instead fragment as party and regional interests undermined its new and fragile experiment in representative governance.<sup>128</sup>

In accusations of gerrymandering, local electoral boundaries were inevitably understood through this national context. An 1819 article discussing the districting in South Carolina and other southern coastal states highlights this entailment between local district maps and their regional, national, and partisan contexts. Its criticisms of South Carolina's district map link troubling cartographic aesthetics to electoral misrepresentation: distorted and misshapen districts of "squares, triangles, circles, parallelograms, [and] every figure the human mind can picture to itself" "give. . . to 4,000 persons in the [South Carolina] low country, the political power and effect of 30,000 persons in the western parts of the state." But, as the article describes it, the political import of this warped electoral map lay not primarily in its localized impact. Rather this district map mattered because it had allowed an entrenched eastern Coastal "faction" to remain firmly in power even though "[a] very few years had reversed [an] order of things" in which, "when the constitution was adopted, the Atlantic States were the most populous . . . [and] the counties on the sea coast were more thickly settled than the counties of the upper country."<sup>129</sup> In other words, these aesthetically distorted districts drawn "solely with a view to the character of the voters included in them" were implicated not only in local intrigue but in a multi-state effort to block a massive – and, as the article characterizes it, natural and inevitable – power shift away from the South's coastal elites.

Articles about partisan gerrymandering in the northeast similarly located their critique of local electoral maps within national politics – in this case partisan disagreements between Federalists and Republicans that had major regional and international ramifications. The original Gerry-mander broadsides, for instance, link the Essex County redistricting and the Gerry-mander's monstrous "ferocity" to the "magnanimous rage for war [with Britain] which seems to have taken such possession of" Governor Gerry and his Republican party. Other accusations by Federalists that Republicans had gerrymandered local district maps included references to slavery's

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<sup>128</sup> Historians sharply disagree over how seriously to take either the threat of political destabilization posed by western settlements or Federalists' Anglophilia and the secession plans that culminated in the abortive Hartford Convention. For the purposes of this chapter, whether or not dissolution of the union was an imminent possibility is less important than the fact that many Americans *believed* it was. This belief was evidenced, for example, by the Jefferson administration's decision, despite a lack of clear evidence, to charge Aaron Burr with treason for attempting to establish an independent western republic. It was also evidenced by the many references to Federalists' and New England's allegiance to Britain and desire to secede in Republican campaign literature.

<sup>129</sup> [No Headline], *City of Washington Gazette* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 25, 1819: 2.

growing power and to the outsized influence of large southern states like Virginia.<sup>130</sup> In these articles and broadsides, these “new gerrymander[s]” were always local but they were never merely so. Rather, these monstrous manifestations of electoral cartography that threatened to swallow or rend in two natural electoral groupings always did so as creatures of regional and partisan forces that were far larger than any one local district. These forces were recognized in their moment as having the potential to shape the American electorate for decades to come – or, even, to tear that electorate and the American electoral map apart.

In keeping with such stakes, these early articles on gerrymandering often contextualized suspect redistricting efforts within an all-encompassing opposition between that which furthered the United States’ founding ideal of governance through legitimate representation and that which instead fostered arbitrary power. One 1815 pro-Federalist article on Democratic-Republicans’ New York redistricting, for example, contrasted Federalist support for an electoral map that followed the “wishes” of the “people” of Cambridge with the Democratic-Republicans’ eagerness to “divide the town, nay, gerrymander it” in order to “insure [their] ascendancy in the county.” As the article frames it, to arbitrarily divide Cambridge over and against the wishes of its people was not only to empower a corrupting and electorally distorting local combination but also to undermine the United States’ founding commitment to represent its electorate – and with it the United States’ protections against forced quartering, warrantless searches, and the abuses of arbitrary power more generally.<sup>131</sup> In other words, like the notion of electoral combinations, whose political and aesthetic framework formed the basis of the Gerrymander broadsides’ intervention into electoral cartography, gerrymandering provided a concept through which a fusion of electoral, literary, visual, and – in this case – cartographic representation could be understood as entirely consonant with or hostile to the United States’ founding Enlightenment ideals.

Framing local gerrymandering through such existential stakes seemed especially appropriate because those gerrymanders could, by shifting the partisan balance in Congress, produce radical and long lasting changes to the national electoral map. For example, as one 1816 article noted, ongoing agitation to “divid[e]” Maine from Massachusetts – a plan that came to fruition in 1820 – threatened “*to destroy the influence of the northern and eastern states.*” So too would a Republican effort, feared but never brought about, to divide New York into two or more smaller states. Such redrawing of state boundaries would leave the rest of the United States to “submit. . . forever to Virginia supremacy,” the article warned, since no northern state would be powerful enough to counter Virginia’s influence. It would also mean “the democrats w[ould] be left to the sole management of the public concerns . . . with perhaps little more opposition from the federalists than occasional remonstrances; when their measures

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.* See also “Political Miscellany,” *The Weekly Messenger* (Massachusetts), Aug. 27, 1813; “Miscellany. Sovereign Power,” *Concord Gazette* (Concord, NH), Jan. 16, 1816: 4; “Political. from the Albany Advertiser,”

*Vermont Mirror* (Middlebury, VT), Aug. 07, 1816: 2.

<sup>131</sup> [No Headline], *Northern Post* (Salem, NY), April 20, 1815: 1.

are particularly oppressive, or when they violate the provisions of the constitution.”<sup>132</sup> This article makes explicit the notion, advanced by other articles as well, that the term gerrymander could name and contextualize political, aesthetic, and cartographic distortions to not only local district borders but state borders as well. It also explicitly links those potential distortions to partisan governance that threatened to violate constitutional first principles. In doing so, the article underscored the degree to which local gerrymandering efforts, by shifting the partisan balance of power, could become implicated in distortions of the national electoral map. Put more generally, within the aesthetic and political framework that gave rise to the term gerrymander, any failure to respect the natural electoral outlines of districts or states amounted to a cartographic attack on the United States’ founding ideals and threatened to return the American people to their pre-Revolutionary state of subjection to arbitrary power.

However, because that same framework’s unstable amalgamation of visual, verbal, electoral, and cartographic representation rendered a “clear line of distinction” between legitimate and arbitrary electoral boundaries impossible to pin down, the early national electoral map perpetually threatened to resolve itself into monstrous gerrymanders. Some accounts of how it might do so were satirical. The article warning of Virginia’s threatened “supremacy,” for instance, wryly suggested that perhaps New York *should* be divided because

It is quite too large now to be well managed – and it is every day growing larger.– Besides, it is a strangely formed thing, stretching from lake Erie to Montauk Point, and almost as much out of shape as a Gerrymander district. Indeed, it is so unweildy and uncouth, that when a spacious map of it was made a few years since, the author of it was obliged to stow away one large piece by itself – he could not otherwise get it on his sheet.<sup>133</sup>

This article likely references Simeon De Witt’s 1802 *Map of New York State* (Figure 13), in which the state’s westernmost corner is mapped separately so that the map can be printed at size on a single broadside. The thrust of the article’s joke is, essentially, that the DeWitt’s difficulty in fitting his map of New York on a single printed broadside is a fundamentally arbitrary measure of whether or not New York’s borders were unnatural and therefore gerrymandered. The implication is that any Republicans tempted to make such a ridiculous argument were political opportunists who put their party’s electoral fortunes over the United States’ founding commitment to legitimate representation. But, the fact that this article could make such a joke pointed to troubling unresolved questions: if New York’s unusual shape was not monstrous, what, exactly, differentiated that shape from the Gerry-mander’s self-evidently monstrous outline? What, in other words, was a legitimate rather than an arbitrary standard to distinguish the natural and legitimate electoral borders of New York State from the unnatural and illegitimate ones of the Essex South district?

Questions like these underpinned the unease surrounding American electoral representation that had led Americans, within a year of the term “Gerry-mander” being

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<sup>132</sup> “Political. from the Albany Advertiser,” *Vermont Mirror* (Middlebury, VT), Aug. 07, 1816: 2.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*



Figure 13: Simeon De Witt. "A Map of the State of New York." Albany: Engraved by G. Fairman, 1802.

coined, to use the concept to question the legitimacy of the national electoral map. For example, one 1813 article, subtitled “Gerrymandering, on a Large Scale,” argued that the United States was effectively gerrymandered both in the sense that the senate apportioned two votes per state rather than by population and that constitutional changes had to be approved by a majority of states rather than a majority of the people. This state of affairs was not initially a problem, the article contended, because “When the union was formed then, a majority of the contiguous states always included a majority of the free people.” However, “new states, especially those recently admitted, have destroyed all the checks and balances of the constitution.” As a result, the “one third who inhabit the southern states send a majority to the senate,” while “[t]he two thirds of the American people who inhabit the northern states” struggle to advance their interests – like, for example, a standing navy – represented in national politics.<sup>134</sup> Other articles made similar claims and insinuations that state boundaries had produced – or were erroneously perceived as producing – national electoral distortions that paralleled that which the Essex South district had wrought on Essex County.<sup>135</sup> Such analogies named and reinforced a disturbingly unstable sort of electoral perception, in which an accurate and ostensibly legitimate map of the United States might, if contextualized by partisans in the era’s ongoing political power struggles, suddenly resolve into the outlines of something illegitimate and monstrous.

At stake in this uneasy mode of electoral perception were fundamental questions about electoral legitimacy that a representational framework grounded in the aesthetics of the character sketch had rendered unresolvable. Apprehended from the perspective established by works like the Eagle Map, the map of the United States seemed to sketch a system of electoral representation whose character self-evidently fulfilled the American Revolution’s promise. Its cartographic bearings were also moral ones, outlining a figure whose essence distilled the traits of the polity that was represented, figuratively and electorally, within its bounds. Viewed instead through the framing of articles that decried local redistricting plans or “Gerrymandering on a Large Scale,” the American electoral map was, instead monstrously and unnaturally distorted. It produced not legitimate electoral representation but rather its warped and unnatural caricature, and in so doing it corrupted and imperiled the ideal of representative governance on which the United States was founded.

Crucially, both the cartographic lines and the aesthetic and political principles each perspective was grounded in were ultimately one and the same. Each looked at the same electoral maps. And each interpreted those maps through an aesthetic and political framework that linked electoral legitimacy to the character sketch’s accurate representations of nature, and electoral illegitimacy to caricature’s unnatural and arbitrary distortions. Yet from only one such perspective did the electoral map of early United States outline an electoral system that self-evidently fulfilled the American Revolution’s

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<sup>134</sup> “Political Miscellany,” *The Weekly Messenger* (Massachusetts), Aug. 27, 1813.

<sup>135</sup> See for example “Political. from the Albany Advertiser,” *Vermont Mirror* (Middlebury, VT), Aug. 7, 1816: 2; “Editors,” *Rhode-Island American*, published as *Rhode-Island American, and General Advertiser* (Providence, Rhode Island), Sept 26, 1817: 3.



promise of representative governance. From the other, the map's distorted electoral boundaries instead threatened to produce warped representations of the electorate that functionally reinstated the arbitrary rule the American people had fought the Revolutionary War in order to escape. In other words, the early U.S. electoral map was the cartographic equivalent of the image of King George III that had been transformed into George Washington at the end of "Rip Van Winkle." Taken by some to self-evidently represent Washington and by others, including Rip, to self-evidently represent George III, it in fact stably represented neither, either within the fictional world of Irving's story or to readers of Irving's description. Rather, both it and the early American electoral map existed in a peculiar state of representational unease as in them the outlines of America's revolutionary ideals and its bogeyman of arbitrary political power coexisted unstably together.

Attending to this unease and its implications requires close attention to the "line[s] of distinction" that described it and, especially, how the representational framework in which they did so relied on unstable correspondences between character sketch, map, and electorate. Take, for example, the line that marks the western border of the Essex South electoral district in the Gerry-mander broadsides (Figure 14). This boundary partially outlines the Gerry-mander's body, whose resemblance to a salamander was, according to legend, first noted by the celebrated portrait painter Gilbert Stuart.<sup>136</sup> The segment of the line that traces the western edges of Andover, Middleton, and Lynfield townships also, according to at least one source, outlines a profile of a face that was "intended for a caricature of Gov. Gerry."<sup>137</sup> In short, this crucial "line of distinction" in the broadside traces an effort to establish the new district's monstrous illegitimacy. It not only marks a portion of the broadside's caricature of the district's cartography but also outlines a caricature of the governor whose party created this ostensibly unnatural and illegitimate electoral map.

Yet the matter of *how*, exactly, the line marks the district's border as illegitimate is in fact deeply ambiguous. Most obviously, the line helps form two caricatures – that of the district and that of Governor Gerry. As such, it strongly associates the district with unnatural distortion in general and electoral combinations specifically. Yet it does so while nevertheless also representing a natural boundary in two senses. First, it marks the western edge of Essex County and thus the original Essex electoral district, which both Federalists and Republicans had regarded as legitimate. Second, it separates the human profile from that of the Gerry-mander, marking a distinction between two "species" whose clarity and stability militates against the formation of an unnatural hybrid monster. This tension leaves unclear how the line on the page, in fact, functions as a "line of distinction." After all, if its purpose is to separate natural and legitimate representation akin to that of the character sketch from unnatural distortions that caricature the electorate, it instead seems to blur the two. Further confounding the matter is the

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<sup>136</sup> Benson John Lossing, *The American Historical Record and Repository of Notes and Queries. Concerning the Antiquities of America and Biography of Americans* (Philadelphia: Chase & Town, 1872-4), Vol. 1, 504.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, Vol. 2, 69.



Figure 14: Portion of the Gerry-mander image rumored to be a caricature of Governor Eldridge Gerry. From "The Gerry-Mander. A New Species of Monster Which Appeared in the District Essex South." Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.



broadside's written account, which embraces the hybridity that the line on the map ostensibly refuses when it describes the Gerry-mander as a creature of Governor Gerry's political environment and coins its name by creating a portmanteau, or hybrid, of the words "Gerry" and "salamander." Perceived in this light, the line conjoins rather than separates, creating caricature and marking political illegitimacy by fusing a politician to his political monster. In short, what emerges from close scrutiny of the ways the line on the page interacts with the aesthetic, conceptual, and political distinctions that inform its meaning is a curious tension between the Gerry-mander image's ostensible self-evidence and the unstable and often mutually exclusive way the line signifies the district's illegitimacy.

Only when all the lines marking electoral boundaries of the early United States are understood as equally imbricated within this confounding representational framework does the conceptual work of the term "gerrymander" become clear. Claims of gerrymandering drew on a framework steeped in such ambiguous and unstable lines in order to insist on the existence of clear and self-evident "line[s] of distinction." In doing so, they reified self-evidence as an aesthetic and electoral ideal while ensuring that, because any line on an American electoral map would correspond unstably with the distinction between natural and unnatural that gave it force, no rendering of American electoral boundaries could attain that ideal of self-evidence in practice. This representational framework rendered perceptions of early American electoral maps deeply uneasy, as the same line might correspond with aspects of that aesthetic and political framework in multiple, contradictory ways.

Consequently, even familiar electoral boundaries, like the western edge of Essex County or the borders of established states, perpetually threatened to resolve into electoral monsters whose horror was compounded by the fact that their outlines appeared self-evidently unnatural only to part of the electorate – and only so long as they were not scrutinized too closely. Put another way, given the curious instabilities in how Americans perceived their electoral boundaries, it is unsurprising that Stuart saw a map of the Essex South district in the editorial offices of the "Boston Centinel" and immediately perceived something "monstrous" in its character, which he proceeded to bring out with "a few touches" of his "pencil." But the more fully the broadside is contextualized within the aesthetic and political framework that led the eminent portraitist to, as the legend goes, sketch "a head, wings, claws, and a tail" on the electoral map, the less clear it becomes what, exactly, he or any of his fellow citizens saw.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, Vol. 1, 504.

### Part III: Constituent Parts and Democratic Wholes

During the first half of the nineteenth, no trope was more common in American campaign literature than comparing a candidate to George Washington. Allusions to the United States' deceased first president were routine during not only presidential contests but also gubernatorial, senate, and even state assembly races. Often, broadsides and pamphlets compared their chosen candidate's virtues to Washington's claiming, as did a pamphlet supporting Abraham Biglow's 1808 bid for congress, that his "integrity" and "political principles were stamped in the Washington mould."<sup>139</sup> Also frequent in both local and national races, especially in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, were references to Washington's 1796 "Farewell Address," in which Washington appealed to an increasingly partisan electorate for national unity. In these allusions, candidates' cast themselves as the true heirs to Washington's electoral mandate and their opponents as recklessly pushing the United States "to the very precipice" of the factional divisions that Washington had warned against.<sup>140</sup>

Especially after 1820, American campaign literature often conflated Washington's virtuous leadership and appeals for national unity with electoral popularity. Having been twice unanimously chosen president by the electoral college, Washington epitomized the ideal, next to impossible to achieve within the nineteenth-century United States' highly-partisan electoral reality, of a presidential candidate who could garner overwhelming popular support. An 1824 pamphlet backing Andrew Jackson, for example, invoked this ideal when it asserted that the then-Senator from Tennessee would be "popular beyond any president since the days of Washington."<sup>141</sup> And during the 1830s and 40s, Washington became electoral shorthand for the hopeful prospect of a president with a broad mandate who could unify the United States' deepening sectional divisions. Presidential campaign biographies routinely labelled their candidates future Washingtons or – as an 1840 campaign biography of William Henry Harrison did – "the Washington of the West."<sup>142</sup> In doing so, they not only cast their candidates as virtuous leaders in Washington's mold but promised that, by electing those candidates, the United States could return to the unified state Washington symbolized.

This embrace of Washington as the electoral template for American leadership and unity was inseparable from Washington's posthumous mythologization, which celebrated his virtue and leadership while downplaying the fractious realities of his military and political career. After his death in 1799, a massive outpouring of books, essays, paintings, prints and ephemera celebrated his accomplishments as Commander-

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<sup>139</sup> "1808 Elector. To the independent electors of Middlesex.: [three lines from Zimmermann]" (Cambridge, Mass.?: s.n., 1808).

<sup>140</sup> "Taunton, March 25, 1809.: Sir, The annual election of state officers, is now at hand" (Boston?: s.n., 1809).

<sup>141</sup> *Address of the Committee Appointed by a Republican Meeting in the County of Hunterdon. Recommending Gen. Andrew Jackson, of Tennessee, to the People of New-Jersey, as President of the United States* (Trenton, NJ: s.n., Sept. 1824).

<sup>142</sup> William Ogden Niles, *The Tippecanoe Text-Book. Biographical Memoirs of General William Henry Harrison* (Baltimore: Duff Green, 1840), 7.

in-Chief of the Continental Army and the first President of the United States. These frequently depicted his unifying leadership as inseparable from his moral stature or imposing bearing.<sup>143</sup> Common among them was their emphasis on Washington's exceptional individual character. According to the "characters," "memorials," and "lives" that cemented the popular image of Washington for the United States' first post-Revolutionary generation, Washington's natural leadership and capacity for unifying the American electorate was inextricable from Washington's incomparable and extraordinary life, works, and moral virtue.

However, references to an exceptional, unifying Washington within electoral pamphlets and broadsides sat uneasily alongside Americans' growing interest in democracy during the early nineteenth century. The spread of democratic ideals rendered suspect the notion of any elected official, even an executive, as set above and apart from the polity at large. Consequently, even as American campaign literature continued to invoke Washington's name and example to cast candidates as legitimate and popular, it increasingly depicted those candidates, not as exceptional individuals set apart from the electorate they represented, but rather as typical of the regions from which they hailed. Amidst this shift toward democratized representation that softened the hierarchical distinction between elected official and voter, many openly wondered if a "*Second Washington*" [would] . . . appear among mankind" or if, instead, the American polity would be permanently rent by partisan and sectional divisions.<sup>144</sup> Underpinning those doubts was profound uncertainty about whether and how a sense of national unity that was deeply connected to the myth an idealized Washington harmonized with democratic principles.

Mediating both Washington's reception and these uncertainties about American electoral representation was the presumption, rooted in the character sketch tradition, that the gentleman played a particular role in unifying the polity. The notion that the gentleman was a unique character type, distinctive for its capacity to bring coherence to the diversity of characters that described the polity, developed in eighteenth-century Britain – especially in picaresque novels that Lynch terms "fictions of social circulation."<sup>145</sup> In the nineteenth-century United States, American novels, biographies, travel literature, and campaign literature sought to adapt the character sketch's representational framework to the American polity by searching for and explicitly celebrating the "original" regional characters unique to the United States. Meanwhile, Washington came to play the role within literary and electoral representations of the American polity that the idealized landed gentleman had played within the British polity: that of a unifying figure whose selfless "disinterestedness" made him uniquely capable of representing and bringing coherence to the polity as a whole.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine how writers grappling with the implications of democracy for both literature and electoral politics engaged with the character sketch tradition generally and the figure of Washington specifically. Chapter 5: "*E Pluribus*

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<sup>143</sup> See Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making Of An American Symbol* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>144</sup> Niles, *The Tippecanoe Text-Book*, 2.

<sup>145</sup> Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 79.

*Washington*” examines how the various – and at times mutually exclusive – ways novels, campaign literature, and literary criticism adapted the character sketch tradition in the United States informed the context and reception of James Fenimore Cooper’s 1821 novel, *The Spy: a Tale of the Neutral Ground*. The chapter focuses in particular on the tensions and contradictions within representations that cast Washington as an American version of the idealized British gentleman. These depictions of a gentlemanly Washington seemed to promise a way to reconcile representation grounded in the character sketch tradition with democracy. However, as *The Spy*’s reception underscores, in practice that reconciliation was fraught at best, and permeating the literary efforts to imagine it was an abiding concern that true democracy might, in fact, be unrepresentable.

Chapter 6: “*Sheppard Lee*’s Electoral Politics and the Properties of Character” examines how Robert Montgomery Bird’s depictions of metempsychosis, in *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (1836), engage with the destabilizing effects of democratized property ownership on literary and electoral representation rooted in the character sketch tradition. Key to this engagement was the novel’s attention not only to the relationships between bodies, character, and property relations but, especially, to how gentlemen’s characters become incoherent in the absence of clear ties to hereditary estates. The messy amalgamations of bodies and spirits that influenced these gentlemen’s characters dramatized the metaphors of bodily firmness and influence that permeated ongoing debates over the Right of Instruction, a Jacksonian electoral doctrine that held that state legislatures should be able to direct the votes of senators in Washington, D.C. In doing so, they exposed the incoherence attendant to electoral representation premised on the character sketch tradition but lacking a reliable way to identify candidates or institutional structures that could fulfill Washington’s unifying role within the United States’ newly democratic elected bodies.

## Chapter 5: *E Pluribus Washington*

Cooper's introduction to the 1849 edition of his 1821 novel, *The Spy: a Tale of the Neutral Ground*, addresses a question readers often asked: whether "there were any foundation in real life, for the delineation of the principal character in his book."<sup>146</sup> Cooper's answer treats the question as a simple one. He assures readers that both the British army and the Continental Army *did* employ spies much like the character Harvey Birch, whose trade as a peddler masks his work as a double agent on behalf of a fictionalized George Washington. Yet, as reviews of *The Spy* registered, for Cooper's literary contemporaries the matter of whether American novels like *The Spy* truly represented life in the early United States could not be settled by a general appeal to historical facts. Rather, for these literary critics, the key unanswered question facing American writers was whether the "characters of [American] fiction" described "classes, and not . . . individuals." Only through such typification of the United States' regional and social variety, many reviewers argued, could American fiction represent the true "nature" of American life.<sup>147</sup>

In the 1820s and 30s, American literary critics fiercely debated both whether American writers had succeeded in depicting such characters and whether the social and aesthetic typification that marked them was compatible, theoretically and practically, with democracy. While many critics celebrated the emergence of such character types in American literature and American life, others remained vocally skeptical that the United States' democratizing society would ever generate the variety of characters that filled British and European fiction. Underpinning such arguments was the presumption that democracy entailed homogeneity. These critics argued that entrenched class distinctions – especially those formed through an established, landed aristocracy – were essential to producing the social and aesthetic variety on which every national literature depended. For such critics, American democracy's refusal of the social and political norms that formed entrenched class distinctions risked fostering a uniformity that would render the American people unrepresentable.<sup>148</sup>

This chapter shows that structuring this literary environment was the notion, developed in eighteenth-century Britain and later imported into American electoral politics, that the landed gentleman played a central role in unifying the vast set of character sketches through which a polity was described. Eighteenth-century British "fictions of circulation" developed this notion through their depictions of wandering gentleman-protagonists who surveyed the various characters that comprised British society. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, American writers adapted this representational framework to American life through twinned engagements with regional character types and the figure of George Washington, whose mythologization as the

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<sup>146</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Spy, a Tale of the Neutral Ground*, Wayne Franklin, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 3.

<sup>147</sup> "Art. XII. – *The Spy, a tale of the Neutral Ground. By the author of Precaution.* 2 vols. 8vo. pp. 537. New York, 1821," *North American Review* 15, no. 36 (July 1822): 251.

<sup>148</sup> For examples of such arguments, see Richard Ruland, ed., *The Native Muse: Theories of American Literature*, (New York: Dutton & Co., 1976), especially 65-203.

Founding Father that epitomized American unity was inextricable from depictions of him as a consummate gentleman. Not confined to fiction, these investments in depicting a unifying Washington and regional American characters permeated American literary criticism, popular culture, biographies, and, especially, the campaign literature of the 1820s and 30s.

By situating *The Spy*'s depictions of both Washington and regional American character types within this literary and electoral context, this chapter reveals how both Cooper's novel and its reviews engaged with broader uncertainties about whether democratic representation was sustainable. Key to these engagements were the novelistic depiction of and critical discussion around a disguised Washington's interactions with many "original" American characters, a depiction which destabilized the entrenched class distinctions between landed gentlemen and other members of the polity. Attending to the aesthetic and political effects of this destabilization productively shifts the focus of scholarship from Cooper's personal investments in American democracy, which to date critics have found vexingly inconsistent, to the context that produced such inconsistencies.<sup>149</sup> At the root of those inconsistencies, this chapter shows, were tensions and contradictions that resulted from relying on a framework anchored by the British figure of the landed gentleman to structure the literary and electoral representations of American democracy.

In their praise of *The Spy*, early American critics frequently celebrated Cooper's writing for the way his characters typified familiar American character types never before seen in print.<sup>150</sup> As the *North American Review* put it, Cooper's "portraits" were "striking likenesses":

Caesar, in particular, whom we are unromantic enough to esteem the true hero of the piece, and who is certainly a pattern for all 'people of color,' is not only a real African, but if any of our readers doubt it, we can point out the very person who

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<sup>149</sup> To date, criticism addressing those inconsistencies has been divided over whether Cooper is, fundamentally, an aristocrat or a Jacksonian Democrat – see Stephen Railton, *Fenimore Cooper: A Study of his Life and Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 10. Recently, critics have begun to pay more attention to how those inconsistencies were not particular to Cooper but rather reflected contradictions and unresolved theoretical problems within Cooper's democratic context. See, for example, Dana Nelson, *Commons Democracy*, 84-104; Stacy Margolis, *Fictions of Mass Democracy*, 125-146; and Gretchen Murphy, "Contract, Adoption, and Sibling Incest: The Problem of Democratic Community in James Fenimore Cooper's *Wyandotté*," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 19-39. None of these works attend to how the character sketch tradition mediated Cooper's and his literary contemporaries' understanding of the intersection between literary and electoral representation. However, Murphy's discussion of Cooper's interest in the political problem of "sameness-in-difference" is deeply resonant with this chapter's account of Cooper's engagements with democratic representation.

<sup>150</sup> Critics singled out Betty Flanagan, the rough and intrepid Irish-American washer-woman, Caesar the loyal "African" servant, and the calculating and fiercely self-sufficient Katy Haynes with particular frequency. In addition to *The North American Review*'s review, see especially "ART. II.--The Spy. A Tale of the Neutral Ground. By the author of 'Precaution,'" *The Port-Folio* (February 1822): 90-91, 95-98; "ART. VIII.—Works of Fenimore Cooper: 1.—Romances," *The American Quarterly Review* (June 1, 1835): 412.

sat for the picture. Sergeant Hollister, overflowing with piety and valor, is a man whom we are all acquainted with. The calculating Katy Haines we meet every day of our lives; - and the speculator upon the land and the misfortunes of others we may not look far to recognize.<sup>151</sup>

In singling out Cooper's depiction of these American characters, reviewers participated in an explosion of interest in American character types that during the early nineteenth century permeated nearly every aspect of American culture. Character types of the "Yankee peddler" and the "backwoodsman" circulated not only in fiction but also in almanacs, biographies, folklore, traveling shows, and songs, among others.<sup>152</sup> And literary critics made such types central both to reviews of individual novels like *The Spy* and to broader theoretical debates about whether and how the United States had produced the raw materials necessary to sustain a distinctive American literary tradition.

The terms through which literary critics conducted these debates routinely drew on and adapted concepts developed in eighteenth-century discourse around the character sketch. For instance, *The North American Review* described Cooper's depictions of American character types as "original sketchings, done with a masterly hand."<sup>153</sup> Likewise, the review explained that gleaning such American originals from "the real characters of life" entailed a process of "striking" extraneous "traits" that was akin to the process of clarifying character described by eighteenth-century British theorists like Gally. An 1822 review in *Port-Folio* used language similarly reminiscent of Gally's, describing *The Spy*'s characters as "naturally delineated." Moreover, this review praised the quantity of characters in *The Spy* with language evoking eighteenth-century debates about how many sketched characters were sufficient to depict the polity without excessive particularity detracting from a sense of the whole: "The characters are sufficiently numerous," the reviewer wrote, "as to produce variety; yet not so crowded, as to create confusion, or distract attention." In short, while such reviewers focused on American "originals," they did so through an aesthetic framework indelibly shaped by the character sketch's long, transatlantic literary history.<sup>154</sup>

Such language underscored the continued influence of the tradition of imagining and representing the polity as a set of characters. In the early nineteenth century, this tradition manifested through surveys of America's emerging character types in regional travel writing, picaresque novels, like Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (published in segments between 1793 and 1815), and literary criticism. *North American Review*'s review of *The Spy*, for instance, proclaims:

[I]n no one country on the face of the globe can there be found a greater variety of specific character, than at this moment developed in the United States of America. Do any of our readers look out of New-England and doubt it? Did any one of them ever cross the Potomac, or even the Hudson, and feel himself surrounded by

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<sup>151</sup> "Art. XII. – *The Spy*," *North American Review*, 279.

<sup>152</sup> Constance Rourke's *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1931) traces how some of these character types circulated among folklore, literature, songs, and other popular media. See especially 15-91.

<sup>153</sup> "Art. XII. – *The Spy*," *North American Review*, 279.

<sup>154</sup> "ART. II. – *The Spy*," *The Port-Folio*, 95.

a different race of men? Is there any assimilation of character between the highminded, vainglorious Virginian, living on his plantation in baronial state, an autocrat among his slaves, a nobleman among his peers, and the active, enterprising, moneygetting merchant of the East, who spends his days in bustling activity among men and ships, and his nights in sober calculations over his ledger and day-book? Is the Connecticut pedlar, who travels over mountain and moor by the side of his little red wagon and half-starved pony, to the utmost bounds of civilization, vending his 'notions' at the very ends of the earth, the same animal with the long shaggy boatman 'clear from Kentuck,' who wafts him on his way over the Mississippi, or the Ohio? Is there nothing of the Dutch burgomaster yet sleeping in the blood of his descendants; no trace of the prim settler of Pennsylvania in her rectangular cities and trim farms? Are all the remnants of her ancient puritanism swept out of the corners of New England? Is there no bold peculiarity in the white savage who roams over the remote hunting tracts of the West; and none in the red native of the wilderness that crosses him in his path? It would be hard indeed out of such materials, so infinitely diversified, (not to descend into the minuter distinctions which exist in each section of the country) which, similar in kind but far less various, have in other countries been wrought successfully into every form of the popular and domestic tale, amusing and instructive, if nothing can be fabricated on this degenerate soil.<sup>155</sup>

Here, the review offers a listing of American character types that is also a grand tour of the United States' new polity. It explicitly and repeatedly ties this list as a whole to the United States' national identity, and it links each character type to a form of property, geographic space, or type of labor specific to one of the major regional, economic, or cultural subdivisions in the American polity. In doing so, the review exemplifies how critics in the early nineteenth century imagined American literature might create for the United States the ideal envisaged by eighteenth-century theorists of the character sketch: a set of characters that represented the polity by collecting and describing its constituent parts.

This approach to representing the American polity also permeated campaign literature, particularly campaign biographies, which first emerged during the 1824 presidential race and in the subsequent decade spread to a wide variety of state-level and national electoral contests. For example, Davy Crockett's 1833 autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Davy Crockett*, which served as a de facto campaign biography in his bid to retain his congressional seat representing Tennessee, traded heavily on the ways Crockett embodied the character type of the Tennessee frontiersman. Likewise did his scathing 1835, *Life of Martin Van Buren*, in which the frontiersman character type becomes key to its case for Crockett's legitimacy as representative of Tennessee:

Until the year 1812, Mr. Van Buren was not elected to any office, though he was always a seeker, holding some petty place in the country, from which he kept a constant look-out. There is [a] difference between us here: - While he was a hunter of bread through an office, I was a hunter of bears through the woods;

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<sup>155</sup> "Art. XII. - *The Spy*," *North American Review*, 252.



while he was *nosing* his game among the grog-shops in the town, I was scenting (to borrow an idea from a poet) the wild deer on the sunny hills of the woodlands; and I have now the comfort to believe, if it has turned me out less fame, it has taken nothing from my honesty.<sup>156</sup>

As campaign biographies like Crockett's depicted it, the individual characters of electoral candidates were formed through years of participation in a particular segment of the American economy or in a specific region's culture, just as Crockett's character had been formed through years hunting game in the American woodlands. Having come, as individuals, to typify and embody the essence of a particular region or other segment of the electorate, a candidate could in turn be a fit electoral representative in a way that someone who did not share that character could never be.

Underpinning this electoral logic was the assumption, rooted in the aesthetic tradition of the character sketch, that representing the American electorate entailed representing the set of new character types the United States had produced. Having emerged within American literature and popular culture, these new character types became central both to early-nineteenth-century campaign literature and to literary critics' engagements with how American writers could represent the U.S. polity. Within the aesthetic and political framework that developed around these types – a framework which profoundly blurred the boundary between the literary and the electoral – Congressmen, like Crockett, could each distill the essence of one of the character types that described the American polity. Congress, in turn, by gathering dozens of such elected representatives, could be imagined to represent that polity as a whole in much the same way that eighteenth-century compendiums of character types, like *The Modern Age Display'd*, did. In short, the new American character types through which American literature, electoral and otherwise, adapted the character sketch tradition to the U.S. polity provided a crucial framework for American readers to imagine how their national electoral representation was connected to the “real life foundations” of their electorate.

However, this framework coexisted uneasily with the expansion of democracy in the early United States. Many literary critics – including, possibly, Cooper himself – worried that a democracy would never produce the “variety” of characters filling British and European fiction.<sup>157</sup> Animating such concerns was a presumed entailment between democracy and homogeneity, both social and aesthetic. According to this logic, a society built around democratized property ownership and political power would never produce entrenched class differences. Because such differences were essential to generating the set of types that were represented through the character sketch tradition, a society that

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<sup>156</sup> The edition cited here is Davy Crockett, *The Life of Martin Van Buren: Heir-apparent to the “government,” and the Appointed Successor of General Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia: Robert Wright, 1837), 31.

<sup>157</sup> In 1852, Stringer and Townsend issued a new edition of *Notions of the Americans* that includes an extended passage from the aristocratic narrator lamenting the lack of “variety” in American “characters” and asserting “I have never seen a nation so much alike in my life, as the people of the United States.” The provenance of these words is unclear – Cooper died in 1851, and the passage does not appear in any of the versions of *Notions* published while Cooper was alive. *The Travelling Bachelor; or Notions of The Americans* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1852), 108.

lacked them would be problematically uniform, not only politically but aesthetically. For example, apprehension about the uniformity that democracy would produce led Edward Tyrell Channing to declare in 1819 that, without “an established order” that could create social and aesthetic variety, the “state of [American] society . . . offer[ed] very imperfect materials for a novel.”<sup>158</sup> Implicit in such criticism was uncertainty about whether and how democracy could be represented, either literarily or electorally, and fear that homogenization could render a democratic polity unrepresentable.

Driving these fears was apprehension that democracy was incompatible with a key device through which British writers had envisaged character sketches as forming a coherent representation of the polity as a whole: the gentleman protagonists at the center of eighteenth-century “fictions of circulation.” According to Lynch, in these picaresque “fictions of circulation,” a wandering gentleman protagonist surveys the various character types that comprise British society, “enabl[ing] readers to apprehend [what] bind[s] them together.” Typically, the gentleman protagonist goes on a “grand tour,” during which he encounters, as Fielding put it in *The History of Tom Jones*, “every kind of character from the minister at his levee, to the bailiff in his sponging house; from the duchess at her drum, to the landlady behind her bar.”<sup>159</sup> Key to the ability of these gentleman protagonists to serve as unifying “social prosthetic device[s]” is their “indistinctive typicality.” What enables this survey to create a cohesive sense of the polity is not only its vastness but the gentleman’s peculiar genteel “characterless[ness].” As Lynch puts it, his noble breeding and “bland handsomeness” render him at once “an acceptable representative for everybody” and “nobody in particular.”<sup>160</sup>

Implicit in the way “fictions of circulation” used blandly typical gentlemen to anchor their depictions of the British polity were fundamentally undemocratic assumptions about who could – and who could not – plausibly be central to or lead a polity. In eighteenth-century Britain, landed gentleman were idealized as uniquely well-situated to understand and act in the best interest of Britain as a whole because, in contrast to men who made a living through business, they could live off of their property alone and thus were “disinterested” enough to approach politics from a perspective broader than their own self-interest.<sup>161</sup> In addition, members of the landed gentry had long been considered the heads of “little commonwealths” – as Locke termed estates’ communities of tenants, servants – and as such they were natural figures to make central to depictions of the larger British Commonwealth as well.<sup>162</sup> American writers seeking to adapt the character sketch tradition to the United States confronted a tension between this literary tradition and American reality. As many literary critics commented on, a landed aristocracy was notably *failing* to establish itself in the United States and public interest in democracy was rapidly growing. How, then, could American literature adapt the character sketch to a polity in which landed gentry were not naturally at the center?

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<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Ruland, *Native Muse*, 120-1.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 81.

<sup>160</sup> Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 82-92.

<sup>161</sup> On the disinterested gentleman, see John Barrell, *English literature in history, 1730-80: an equal, wide survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), 32-69.

<sup>162</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 136.

For many such writers, George Washington offered a figure through which the tension between British tradition and American reality might be reconciled. Key to this reconciliation was Washington's image as a consummate gentleman. This gentlemanly image – cultivated both during his tenures as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army and the first President of the United States and, especially, in his posthumous mythologization – was inseparable from Americans' idealization of his capacity for natural leadership and national unification. Before the Revolution, Washington had spent decades self-consciously nurturing this image; this persona suffused his military and political stewardship, epitomized by the gentlemanly ideal of “disinterested” concern for the country as a whole. One particularly famous example of this gentlemanly disinterest was his “Farewell Address,” which, in response to the fractious partisanship that developed during his two presidential terms, emphasized the importance of “carefully guarding and preserving the union of the whole.”<sup>163</sup> This “extraordinary character,” marked by a selfless and disinterested gentlemanly capacity for leading and unifying the nation, likewise became central to Washington's posthumous mythologization, featuring prominently in the many printed memorials, “Characters” and “Lives of Washington” that appeared after his death in 1799.<sup>164</sup>

Coexisting with this mythologization of a gentlemanly Washington who could unify the American polity were fictionalized depictions of Washington's private life that offered a template for imagining how his “extraordinary character” might be reconciled with democratic representation. The most widely read of these was Mason Locke Weems' *Life of Washington*, first published in 1800 and repeatedly expanded and reprinted over the subsequent two decades. Between 1806 and 1808, editions of Weems' *Life of Washington* began to insist that anecdotes about Washington's childhood, including a prophetic dream by his mother and the now-famous story of chopping down the cherry tree, were essential to “represent[ing] him what he really was.” Only by showing how Washington's “bright example. . . of *human perfectibility* and *true greatness*” evolved out of his “private virtues,” these revised editions suggested, could the true heroism of Washington's extraordinary public character be appreciated.<sup>165</sup> Crucially, these new depictions of Washington's private life promised to make his

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<sup>163</sup> George Washington, “The Address of General Washington To The People of The United States on his declining of the Presidency of the United States,” *Daily American Advertiser* (Philadelphia), Sept. 19, 1796.

<sup>164</sup> “Advertisement – 1803. An History (4<sup>th</sup> edition *greatly improved*) of The Life and Death of Gen. George Washington: Carefully collected, in the neighbourhood of Mount Vernon, from the most authentic Documents: Exhibiting his very extraordinary Character, not only as a Soldier and a Statesman, but as a Man; And a man of that early prudence – admirable fortitude – rigid temperance – unwearied industry – honor unblemish'd, and uncorrupted patriotism, which render *him* the admiration of the world, and *this his History* well worthy the perusal of every Young Man who wishes, like Washington, to *live*, greatly useful and happy; and to *die*, universally lamented and beloved. With an elegant copper plate likeness of him. Price 37 1-2 cents., R. Cochran, Printer.

<sup>165</sup> Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of George Washington; With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honorable To Himself, And Exemplary to His Young Countrymen. . . . Sixth Edition . . . . [Sic] Greatly Improved. By M. L. Weems, Formerly Rector Of Mount-Vernon Parish* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Author, by R. Cochran, 1808), 4-7.

exceptional private character accessible to all Americans, not only as a gentlemanly ideal to look up to but also as an example to emulate. Through *Life of Washington's* depictions of Washington's childhood and private life, readers could, according to the prefatory materials, make "your Father's virtues all your own" – and thus, mold their own characters according to Washington's "extraordinary" gentlemanly ideal.<sup>166</sup>

Concomitant with Weems' depictions of Washington as a model for all citizens were passages that cast Washington's character as a natural, but geographically non-specific, emanation from the American landscape. As the 1808 edition put it:

[W]here shall we look for Washington, the greatest among men, but in *America*? The greatest Continent, which, rising from beneath the frozen pole, stretches far and wide to the south, running almost "whole the length of this vast terrene," and sustaining on her ample sides the roaring shock of half the watery globe. And equal to its size, is the furniture of this vast continent, where the Almighty has spread his sea-like lakes, and poured his mighty rivers, and hurled down his thundering cataracts in a style of the *sublime*, so far superior to any thing of the kind in the other continents, that we may fairly conclude that great men and great deeds are designed for America.<sup>167</sup>

Washington's character, this passage suggests, was formed not, as Crockett's was, through labor in a regionally specific landscape, but rather in concert with the geography of the American continent as a whole, marked as it is by "vast[ness]" and "ample[ness]." Yet this natural environment does not befit merely Washington's exceptional individual character as "the greatest among men." Rather, its awe-inspiring natural features are clear signs that "great men and great deeds are designed for America," suggesting, paradoxically, that anyone, anywhere on the American continent could partake in Washington's exceptional character.<sup>168</sup> Through such descriptions, *Life of Washington* renders democratically accessible the gentlemanly ideal Washington embodied. These passages suggest America's future gentlemen would be formed not by "baronial estates" but rather within a landscape whose exceptionality was accessible to and generative of the characters of all Americans.

However, Washington's democratization of the gentlemanly ideal through which Britons had imagined a unified polity was difficult to reconcile with the regionally-specific character types through which American writers and critics sought to adapt the

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<sup>166</sup> Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington The Great. Enriched With A Number of Very Curious Anecdotes, Perfectly in Character, and Equally Honorable TO Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen. A life how useful to his country led! How LOV'D! while LIVING . . . [sic] how REVER'D! now DEAD! Lisp! Lisp! His name, ye children yet unborn! And make your Father's virtues all your own! THE FIFTH EDITION. . . . [sic] GREATLY IMPORVED. PRICE 50 CENTS. By M. L. WEEMS. OF LODGE NO. 50. . . . [sic] DUMFRIES* (Augusta [GA]: Re-printed by Geo. F. Randolph, 1806).

<sup>167</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington . . . Sixth Edition*, Philadelphia, 1808, 8.

<sup>168</sup> This sense of Washington as a natural but nonspecific emanation of America's natural environment is further reinforced by an anecdote that follows shortly after about Washington's father planting his son's name in cabbage seeds in order to reinforce his young son's belief in God. Though readers are in on the father's trick, the image of the word "Washington" springing from the soil in the form of young cabbage plants nevertheless reinforces *Life of Washington's* assertion that, with the right cultivation, Washington's character could be cultivated in anyone, anywhere in America. *ibid.*, 16-19.

character sketch tradition to American soil. If, despite differences in geography, forms of labor, and economic interest, any American could become the next Washington, how then would America produce the entrenched differences that would form the distinctive American characters so many critics yearned for? Alternately, if Americans were to represent themselves through “original” characters like “the backwoodsman,” “the Connecticut peddler,” and the “vainglorious Virginian,” how would the set of such characters form a cohesive whole without an American equivalent to the landed gentlemen at center of British “fictions of circulation”? The ways American writers had adapted the aspects of the character sketch tradition that centered on the idealized British gentleman existed in tension with the ways Americans adapted the practice of describing a polity’s constituent characters more broadly. And ongoing democratization threatened to worsen that tension as class differences based on property ownership became less stable and the matter of what else might unify a polity, conceived as comprised of distinctive regional characters, became even less clear.

The electoral reforms of the 1820s, which blurred the class distinctions that had defined the American franchise, underscored the electoral stakes of such ongoing uncertainty about how American democracy could be made representable. Accomplished entirely through state constitutional conventions, these reforms dramatically lowered or eliminated property qualifications for both elected office holders and white male voters and, as a result, radically democratized political power in the United States.<sup>169</sup> The rhetoric through which conservative and Whig delegates typically resisted these reforms often overlapped with that which literary critics used to bemoan democracy’s corrosive effects on the entrenched distinctions that produced social “variety” and made a polity representable as a set of character types. For instance, during the 1829-30 Virginia Constitutional Convention, Abel P. Upshur advocated against the expansion of suffrage in part by arguing that the formation of the “different and distinct . . . interests” represented within a legislature followed from property. To expand the franchise to all white men, Upshur suggested, would undermine the premise – “that the world is divided into separate and distinct communities” – on which the electorate was divided into “particular districts.”<sup>170</sup> In other words, for delegates like Upshur, the threat that democratic electoral reform posed to electoral representation followed directly from its homogenizing disruption of the “different and distinct . . . interests” through which the electorate could be grouped and thus made representable.

Cooper’s 1828 *Notions of the Americans*, even as it praised American democracy, registered related concerns about how expanded suffrage would affect American electoral representation. Narrated by a fictional British aristocrat who extensively quotes his likewise-fictional American guide, John Cadwallader, *Notions* elaborately describes the electoral structures of American democracy, from the most local level of the town

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<sup>169</sup> See Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 181-202. Note also that the same state constitutional conventions that expanded suffrage for white men frequently eliminated or restricted extant limited suffrage rights for widows and free blacks.

<sup>170</sup> Quoted in *Proceedings and debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-1830, Volume 1. To Which Are Subjoined, The New Constitution of Virginia, and the Votes of the People* (Richmond: Printed by Samuel Shepherd & Co. For Ritche & Cooke, 1830), 71, 67.

meeting to statewide elections for U.S. Congressmen and Senators. Cadwallader openly celebrates unfettered electoral democracy, in which “all classes . . . have a direct influence on [the nation’s] policy,” and specifically praises New York’s expansion of the franchise to all white men, regardless of whether they owned property.<sup>171</sup> Yet, even as he does so, his concessions to the aristocratic narrator’s anticipated objections to universal suffrage undermine his professed optimism. At one point, for instance, Cadwallader interrupts his staunch advocacy for democratized suffrage to say that “a trifling qualification of property may sometimes be useful” to keep the “ignorant, profligate, and vagabond part of the community” from voting (264-65). As such, Cadwallader’s idealized account of American democracy nevertheless contains notes of profound, albeit never fully articulated, ambivalence about the whether that ideal fully jibed with the realities of American electoral representation.

Through this staging of ambivalence, *Notions* points to the ways the United States’ democratic electoral structures mystified the class and political hierarchies through which a figure, like the king or the landed gentleman, could be imagined as central to a polity’s cohesion.<sup>172</sup> As Cadwallader put it, in response to the narrator’s objection – common among British aristocrats at the time – that without a king or aristocracy to rule the United States would have no clear leadership:

It is of far less importance, according to our notions, what the executive of a nation is called, than that all classes should have a direct influence on its policy. We have no king, it is true, for the word carries with it, to our ears, an idea of expenditure; but we have a head, who, for the time being has a very reasonable portion of power. We are not jealous of him, for we have taken good care he shall do no harm.<sup>173</sup>

Cadwallader’s response ostensibly refutes the notion that a democracy – in which “all classes should have a direct influence on . . . policy” – is incompatible with strong and clear executive leadership. Yet the image through which he does so – a “head” whose “ears” are claimed by a first-person plural voice that insists “we are not jealous of him, for we have taken good care he shall do no harm” – suggests profound uncertainty about what the degree and nature of that executive power is and from where it arises. The ostensibly “executive” head is in fact controlled by a body whose first-person plural pronouns sit in tension with the head’s nominal singularity. Not only does this metaphor muddy the direction through which power is exerted, but it also obfuscates what constitutes a “very reasonable portion of power” for a democratically chosen leader. After all, while one might think a head very reasonably needs to have the power to direct the movements of the body, this passage suggests the power allocated to the head of the United States’ democracy is reasonable precisely because it does *not* enable the head to do so.

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<sup>171</sup> *Notions of the Americans* was first published by Carey, Lea, & Carey in Philadelphia in 1828. The edition cited here is James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, & Carey, 1835), 264-65.

<sup>172</sup> Here Cooper’s take on landed gentlemen appears to be largely consistent with that Thomas Bender describes in “James Fenimore Cooper and the City,” *New York History* 51, no. 3 (April 1970): 287-305.

<sup>173</sup> Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, 268-69.

This passage – with the undertow of doubt permeating its boosterish rhetoric on the expansion of the franchise – points to the ways democratic electoral reforms interacted in destabilizing ways with a framework for representation anchored by a gentlemanly Washington. For example, could any central figure bring about a polity’s cohesiveness if that “head” did not control, but rather was controlled by, a radically democratized electoral body that now included the “ignorant, [the] profligate, and vagabond[s]”? Put another way, would it still matter whether that executive shared Washington’s gentlemanly disinterest if that executive was in the thrall of a democratized polity? And, if that central executive nevertheless retained some role in ensuring the polity’s coherence, how, with the class distinctions so destabilized, would the United States ensure that voters did not replace the idealized Washingtonian gentleman at its center with an “ignorant” and “profligate . . . vagabond”? Or did the dictates of democratic representation demand instead that such a dissolute executive be accepted if chosen by the electorate? Put more generally, if the entrenched differences that had distinguished the landed gentleman from, for example, the ignorant, profligate vagabond dissolved, what would guide Americans’ electoral choices regarding what centered or brought cohesiveness to literary and electoral representations of their polity? And how would those choices affect the larger framework, rooted in the character sketch, through which those representations had taken place?

Cooper explores these questions in *The Spy*, published just after New York’s 1820-21 constitutional convention, which eliminated its property qualification for white men. The novel is set during the Revolutionary War in the neutral ground between the British and American armies. It follows the travails of the divided Wharton family, whose inn, The Locusts, is located in the neutral ground and whose eldest son, Henry, fights in the British Army while his younger sister ardently supports the American cause. Use of disguise features heavily throughout the novel. In its opening pages, George Washington seeks lodging in the guise of one “Mr. Harper,” and Henry Wharton appears at his family’s home so heavily disguised his own father and sisters do not recognize him. The novel’s central plot hinges on the exploits of Harvey Birch, whose appearance as a typical Connecticut peddler masks his work as a double agent for the Revolutionary cause. And the novel’s climax centers around the rescue of Henry, who is set to be executed in a patriot camp but is freed when Birch smuggles him out in blackface, leaving the family’s loyal servant, Caesar, disguised as a gentleman, to take his place.

Through these episodes of disguise, *The Spy* engages with democracy’s erosion of the entrenched distinctions through which a polity is sorted into characters – especially those distinctions that mark the difference between gentlemen and everyone else. The novel’s plot hinges on the fact the propertied, gentlemanly Henry Wharton could be mistaken, albeit briefly, for a black servant, and vice versa. Likewise, it depends on the fact that the lofty Washington himself could pass, at least marginally convincingly, for a typical colonial gentleman rather than the exceptional and singular Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. In other words, while *The Spy*’s plot stops short of Weems’ radically democratic suggestion, in *Life of Washington*, that *anyone* could acquire Washington’s character, it depicts the boundaries of both the character type of the landed gentleman and Washington’s individual gentlemanly character as flexible, amenable to

expansion, revision, and masquerade. While both Washington himself and gentlemen more generally retain some of the distinctive qualities that enabled them to serve as unifying centers of the American and British polities, each acquires plasticity consistent with democratic representation in which “all classes . . . have a direct influence.”

Contemporary reviewers’ skeptical responses to the novel’s many disguises underscore the challenges such flexibility posed for representation rooted in the character sketch tradition. Take, for example, the climactic scene in which Caesar trades places with Henry Wharton, a well-heeled British soldier whose grandfather’s “parliamentary interest” in England had enabled the Wharton family to establish an estate in New York. In that scene, Birch smuggles himself into Wharton’s prison cell disguised as a firebrand preacher, frees Wharton, whom he disguises with blackface and Caesar’s clothes, and leaves loyal Caesar, now himself disguised in Wharton’s clothes, to take Wharton’s place. With the help of a parchment mask, a wool wig, and stuffing for Wharton’s calves, which are too well-turned to pass for those of a black servant, “the master and the man . . . change places,” albeit briefly.<sup>174</sup> Wharton’s disguise succeeds well enough to free him from the cell, and Caesar’s disguise, though somewhat less successful, buys enough time to ensure Wharton’s escape. In other words, where “the manners of England and its aristocratical notions of blood and alliances” had maintained sharp distinctions between “master and man,” both socially and electorally, the American Revolution had instead created both the occasion and the necessity for such clear distinctions to blur.<sup>175</sup>

Reviewers, however, strongly resisted such blurring, asserting that Henry and Caesar’s masquerade was utterly implausible, even for the brief moments the disguise holds before it is discovered. As one reviewer put it:

Wharton’s escape is a very clumsy contrivance. To suppose that vigilant sentinels in broad day, should mistake a man in a black mask for a real negro, is making rather a larger draught upon our faith, than we can answer in this part of the country.<sup>176</sup>

The reviewer’s line of attack is telling. He does not contest, as one reasonably could, the absurdity that a sentinel would mistake Henry’s slipshod disguise for Caesar’s actual figure. Instead, his critique hinges on the premise that two character types – a gentleman and a “real negro” – could not ever be perceived as interchangeable. Where *The Spy* had moved, albeit tentatively and fleetingly, toward an American literature in which the strictly delineated categories of gentlemanly “master” and “man” might blur, the reviewers instead saw a wealthy and propertied white man trading places with a black servant and balked.

Reviewers likewise balked at scenes in which Washington appeared as “Mr. Harper” in order to meet with Birch. Having Washington appear as Mr. Harper was implausible, one reviewer argued, since “the whole character of Washington is against” the notion that he “ever submitted to a personal disguise[.] . . . His remarkable stature and physiognomy, his lofty carriage, [and] the unbending dignity of his whole demeanor .

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<sup>174</sup> Cooper, *The Spy*, 332.

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

<sup>176</sup> “ART. XII. - The Spy,” *North American Review*, 270.



. . . render him the most unfit of all men to practice such a deception.”<sup>177</sup> Another reviewer insisted that, when Washington appeared as Harper, readers should have been able to “recognize. . . him by more striking features; for it seems to us that the presence of a great man should change everything around him, casting a broad and dazzling light.”<sup>178</sup> Common to these reviewers’ reactions was a conviction that Washington’s character was simply too exceptional to be mistaken for or disguised as anyone else. While those reactions differed in their specifics, they shared the assumption that the “striking features” which marked Washington’s character inside and out also demarcated a firm boundary between Washington’s individual character and everyone else’s.<sup>179</sup>

Moreover, reviewers framed their objections to *The Spy*’s dulling of Washington’s distinctiveness in terms that were political as well as aesthetic. One argued that:

a heroic general like Washington should not have worn the disguise of Mr. Harper to the last; for it is offering to great a violence to our immortal man to exhibit him, unattended and almost in sight of the enemy, begging for a night’s lodging, or skulking in a hut to obtain an interview with a pedlar-spy. Moreover there is nothing done by him, which could not have been effected by an inferior agency.<sup>180</sup>

Another was even more direct, claiming “so recently . . . after the termination of his conspicuous career, [Washington] should appear, if he would appear safely, only as his countrymen have known and must ever remember him, at the head of armies, or in the dignity of state,” not in the mere “common courtesies” and the “grosser familiarities of life.”<sup>181</sup> These comments assert that softening the distinction between an “immortal” and “heroic” leader like Washington and a man, even a gentleman, “of inferior agency” was not only unconvincing but “violent” and dangerous. Portraying Washington as a man like any other, busy with “common courtesies” and the “grosser familiarities of life” could not be done “safely,” these reviews suggest, within American literature.

Though neither reviewer fully articulated the assumptions behind these warnings, they share a representative logic with the era’s broader literary and electoral concerns regarding how democracy might destabilize understandings of the polity structured by the character sketch tradition. According to this logic, in the early United States, Washington held the central role that the disinterested landed gentleman had played eighteenth-century Britain: that of a character uniquely suited to survey, unify, and act in the interests of the polity as a whole. Consequently, any blurring of the distinction between Washington’s “striking” features and those of the common American man threatened to disrupt not only the image through which “his countrymen have known” Washington as an individual but also the representative framework through which Americans imagined

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<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*, 260-61

<sup>178</sup> “Works of Mr. Cooper,” *The American Monthly Magazine*, 562.

<sup>179</sup> Only the British *Edinburg Review* omits such complaints, choosing to focus instead on Cooper’s mistreatment of a cartoonishly awful bigamist British general. See “Remarks on ‘The Spy,’” reprinted in *The Port-Folio* (March 1823).

<sup>180</sup> “ART. II. – The Spy,” *The Port-Folio*, 96.

<sup>181</sup> “ART. XII. – The Spy,” *North American Review*, 261.

their new polity cohering into a whole. Put another way, in order to ensure and preserve the American polity whose creation was central to Washington's "conspicuous career," Americans "must ever remember" Washington "in the dignity of state" that marked his importance and centrality, not as simply a man who, in a democracy, was the equal of any other man.

*The Spy* likewise operates within this representative logic, and its climactic scenes of disguise dramatize the destabilizing effects literary critics feared when they argued democracy was incompatible with American literature. Take, for example, the scene in which a prison guard looks in on Caesar, then disguised as Wharton, and concludes that "his charge" is "in deep abstraction." Literally, "abstraction" here refers to Caesar's feigned prayerful contemplation, but it also suggests how disguise and role exchange have imaginatively transformed Caesar's and Henry's characters from neatly particularized types into abstract and interchangeable human beings. Birch's answer, when Wharton asks why Birch is willing to help rescue him from the American camp, hints at a similar sort of abstraction: "I have promised *one* to save you," Birch replies, referring, readers later learn, to a promise made to Washington himself. Yet, when pressed in the moment on who this mysterious benefactor-in-espionage is, Birch replies, "No one."<sup>182</sup> Such language momentarily transmutes heroic general and future United States' President into no one and anyone, a great leader who is at the same time equal to, and perhaps even interchangeable with, every man. In doing so it envisages the radical democratization of a representational framework that had put the landed gentleman – and later a gentlemanly Washington – at the center of, while simultaneously holding his character above and apart from, the rest of the polity. However, the cost of this democratization is a homogeneity that, because in it every man is a "no one" interchangeable with every other man, verges on unrepresentability.

Through its embrace of espionage, *The Spy* posits a solution to this paradox of democratic representation: gentlemen spies. In Cooper's novel, spies depend on the character types their espionage disrupts. That is to say, a spy cannot disguise himself in pure abstraction – as a citizen without the class, regional, racial, and professional attributes that identify the character types Cooper's reviewers placed such importance on. Instead, Cooper's spies, like all spies, must disguise themselves among localized characters. Consequently, even as Cooper's spies act out a democratizing vision in which any given man is interchangeable with any other man, they do not generate the unrepresentable homogeneity that many critics feared was inevitable under democracy. Rather, their reliance on regional character types for their disguises reinforces those types and, with them, the aesthetic and political framework through which Americans understood their polity as a set of characters.

Cooper's spies also offer a way to reconcile the gentlemanly Washington at the center of that framework with democracy's imperative to create representation that gives "all classes . . . direct influence" both on the polity as a whole and the "head" at its center. Through espionage, Cooper's Washington can be, if not absolutely anyone, then at the very least some small number of characters other than himself. Likewise, a humble

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<sup>182</sup> Cooper, *The Spy*, 334-35.

Connecticut peddler like Birch can, if not take on the guise of Washington himself, then at least become like him in the sense that they are both spies. These and other moments of espionage throughout the novel weaken the hierarchical distinctions between a gentleman like Washington and everyone else, a weakening that made representation rooted in the character sketch tradition difficult to reconcile with democracy. And, crucially, they do so without obliterating those distinctions entirely, thus allowing the Washingtonian gentleman to maintain his unique role in unifying representations of the American polity.

Yet, to treat Cooper's vision of democratic representation anchored by gentleman-spies as a final word – or even as especially optimistic – would be to misunderstand how *The Spy* fit into its wider literary and electoral context. The mere fact that the novel put spies at the center of its depiction of democratic representation, despite their associations with duplicity and untrustworthiness, points to the ominous instabilities at the core of democratic representation rooted in the character sketch tradition. Moreover, the resistance that *The Spy*'s depictions of espionage and disguise received from literary critics underscores how entrenched the tradition of representing the polity as a set of character sketches organized around a central, gentlemanly figure was in the early nineteenth century. Despite the tensions and contradictions entailed in representing American democracy through that tradition, reviewers reflexively reinforced it, attacking any scene or description that challenged it too directly. In practice, then, Cooper's fictionalized gentleman-spies were not harbingers of how the character sketch tradition could be reconciled with democratic representation. Rather, *The Spy* and its reception together merely make visible the texture of the uneasy and fundamentally incoherent framework through which Americans imagined their electorate into the Jacksonian era.

## Chapter 6: *Sheppard Lee's* Electoral Politics and the Properties of Character

Electoral politics take up very little page space in the published version of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*. Elections feature only once in the wild and wide-ranging plot driven by its titular character's metempsychotic inhabitation of six other Americans' corpses. While in the body of Zachariah Longstraw, a Quaker abolitionist who has been kidnapped by bounty hunters, Lee witnesses Virginia congressional candidate, Hampden Jones, give a stump speech. The riled up crowd then turns on the abolitionist, demanding his lynching, and Lee, fearful of impending death, projects his spirit into the corpse of the slave, Tom, who had just then fallen from a tree and broken his neck. Though the anecdote is ready fodder for commentary on electoral politics in Jacksonian America, Lee's narration of the episode largely sidesteps the opportunity to opine on American elections or elected officials. The plot quickly moves on to Tom's plantation, which at first seems idyllic but quickly erupts into a bloody slave revolt, and the election-day anecdote registers as peripheral to *Sheppard Lee's* larger narrative of bodily estrangement and reinhabitation.

However, Bird's manuscript notes, which include an outline for an unwritten section called "Sheppard Lee Goes to Congress," make clear he had elections and electoral politics on his mind as he composed *Sheppard Lee*. The outline references Lee speechifying in a village, his election, his receiving an administrative appointment in exchange for voting across party lines, and a series of bizarre motions on the House floor, including a request that congress "reward all those who by discerning, writings, &c. have benefitted & honored the Country." It also mentions that one of Lee's floor speeches "denie[d] the Right of Instruction," a controversial electoral doctrine in the 1830s that held that state legislatures could direct senators on how to vote. And it suggests that Lee's claims in a floor speech about whether the "U.S. has produced more than one Washington" were so absurd that they resulted in him being committed to an asylum.<sup>183</sup> These unrealized manuscript notes demonstrate unmistakably that, as Bird drafted and revised *Sheppard Lee*, he was aware of and concerned with the key electoral issues during Andrew Jackson's two terms as president. In doing so, they raise questions, to-date entirely unaddressed by scholarship on the novel, about whether and how these engagements with electoral politics color the published version, in which elections are largely absent.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird Papers, UPenn Ms. Coll 108, Box 11, Folder 259.

<sup>184</sup> In the 1840s, Bird became heavily involved in Whig party politics. He participated in Whig conventions, corresponded with party operatives, and even undertook a brief and abortive campaign for Congress. His papers at the University of Pennsylvania include drafts more than two dozen speeches on topics such as Henry Clay, Zachary Taylor's victory, the Locofoco Party, slavery, international tariffs, Mexico, and "Whig apathy." Also included are manuscript drafts of Bird's campaign biography of Delaware Senator John M. Clayton, as well as a printed copy of Bird's campaign biography of Delaware gubernatorial candidate Major Thomas Stockton – see Robert Montgomery Bird Papers, UPenn Ms. Coll 108, Box 22, Folders 294-7. However, in part because the majority of this political work commenced after Bird ceased writing novels, the connections between Bird's electoral politics and his fiction have remained largely unexplored.

This chapter argues that, while the final version of *Sheppard Lee* renders electoral plots peripheral, its depiction of metempsychosis nevertheless remains deeply preoccupied with matters of electoral representation. Central to this preoccupation was the uneasy relationship between the United States' increasingly democratized property ownership and the literary ideal of the landed estate, which, as *Sheppard Lee*'s wry depictions of Philadelphia high society and southern plantations underscore, was difficult to reconcile with the lived realities of Jacksonian America. Through Lee's picaresque narrative, wandering into and out of a number of these would-be gentlemen's bodies, the novel explores how democratized property ownership destabilizes not only the framework through which a set of characters represents a polity as a whole but also individual characters' internal coherence. *Sheppard Lee*'s depictions of this incoherence dramatized in concrete terms the metempsychotic metaphors through which Americans conceived of the unstable relationships among the United States' many elected bodies, both individual and collective, during the Jacksonian era. Through these depictions, the novel explores the ambiguities and tensions inherent in how Americans imagined interactions among state and national legislative bodies, as well as in how candidates and legislators invoked the figure of Washington in order to make the case for how the United States' many elected bodies collectively represented the electorate as a whole.

Key to how the novel engages these electoral problems is the strange and very particular texture of Lee's metempsychosis. As both Samuel Otter and Christopher Looby note, Lee's character is largely determined by the bodies in which he finds himself, but it is not purely so. Rather, the fact that aspects of Lee's original character always persist *despite* his new physical circumstances suggests that there is some influence beyond the material on the constitution of Lee's character – an identity or spirit not reducible to the matter that informs him.<sup>185</sup> This chapter shows that, through these lags and incongruities as Lee's spirit moves from body to body, the novel examines the highly unstable relationships between physical bodies, property ownership, and character that defined Jacksonian democracy. In doing so, it highlights the strangeness and confusion inherent in how Americans imagined their bodies – both individual and legislative – merging into collective wholes.

Like the authors of eighteenth-century British "fictions of social circulation," Bird was engaged deeply with the notion of character type. The manuscript notes for *Sheppard Lee* brim with scribbled character types that Bird considered incorporating into the novel.

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<sup>185</sup> Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10; Christopher Looby, Introduction to *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself*, edited by Christopher Looby (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), xvii-xx. Scholarship on *Sheppard Lee* has overlooked this excess and its effects on the way Lee inhabits the bodies he lays claim to. Instead, scholars have focused on how Lee's metempsychotic leaps evoke a Jacksonian-era proliferation of seemingly frictionless circulation and exchange – whether of print, money, information, or the "fragmented stuff of personhood" itself, as James Lilley puts it in *Common Things: Romance and the Aesthetics of Belonging in Atlantic Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford 2013), 111. See, for example, Michael Cohen, "Peddling Authorship in the Age of Jackson," *ELH* 79, no. 2 (2012): 369-388; and Jordan Stein, "The Whig Interpretation of Media: Sheppard Lee and Jacksonian Paperwork," *History of the Present* 3, no. 1 (2013): 29-56.

These characters describe a wide cross-section of the social types that comprised nineteenth-century American society, including, among dozens of others, “The Physician,” “The Drunken Philanthropist And Abolitionist,” “The genteel forger, counterfeiter, and bank robber,” and “The popular actor.”<sup>186</sup> Often jotted down without elaboration on small scraps of paper, these character types collectively suggest that Bird imagined the polity of Jacksonian America in much the same way as authors of eighteenth-century “fictions of social circulation” had imagined Britain’s: through an interlocking set of sketched characters. Bird’s notes also suggest that, at least for Bird’s early composition process, typicality was primary. While characters that made it into the novel would eventually be fleshed out through action, dialogue, and detail, their geneses relied on a sense of character tied not to depth, development over time, or individuality but rather to social type.

Though such investment in character type was common in early American picaresques, *Sheppard Lee* stands out for a second feature it shares with British “fictions of social circulation”: its protagonist’s journey starts and ends at an ancestral estate. This formula structured eighteenth-century British novels, like *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749) and *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), both of which circulated widely in the early United States and feature an eponymous protagonist wandering after he is forced to abandon his hereditary property. In them, the gentleman’s involuntary dislocation from his rightful estate becomes the occasion for his “grand tour” of British society. As he roams, he encounters the characters that comprise British society, in the process enabling readers to survey them as well. Yet the sense of the polity that these “fictions of social circulation” convey depends not only on this expansive picaresque survey but also on the gentleman protagonist’s return, at the end of the novel, to his rightful estate. Through these returns to ancestral property, these novels cement their protagonists’ gentlemanly status and reinforce the sense that landed estates were the stable, central anchors around which such surveys of the expanding and changing British polity could coalesce.

Early American picaresque novels, by contrast, rarely had strong geographic centers of gravity. In the second paragraph of Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry*, for instance, its protagonist Captain Farrago wanders off with his servant, Teague O’Regan, simply because “the idea had come in to his head to . . . ride about the world a little.”<sup>187</sup> This thinly motivated journey through Pennsylvania’s countryside continues for 800 more pages – which Brackenridge published in installments between 1792 and 1815 – without Farrago ever finding a wife with whom he might settle down and produce a lineage. The novel simply ends without him returning, or even hoping to return, home. When early American *picares* do return, they rarely reaffirm a connection to an ancestral property or come home with any sense of finality. With such irresolution, the physician protagonist of Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797) arrives at the home of his beloved parents after a journey around the United States and to Africa, where he was taken captive. Whether he will inherit his parents’ property, start a family of his

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<sup>186</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird Papers, UPenn Ms. Coll 108, Box 11, Folder 259.

<sup>187</sup> Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, 6.

own, or stay in New England at all, the novel does not say. More to the point, it does not seem especially to care.

While American *picaros* share this lack of ties to property with such earlier Spanish *picaros* as Lazarillo de Tormes and Don Quixote, the American setting for their journey gives their wanderings a very different valence. Historical accounts of Spanish picaresque novels consistently cast the form as a reaction to the destruction of the feudal economic order, as well as an associated worldview which situated the individual within a society that “allowed each person to contribute to the harmonious working” of the whole.<sup>188</sup> According to this line of criticism, as Spanish *picaros* wander roads linking new and bustling city marketplaces with the remains of the communities once sustained by hereditary estates, they renew corroding ties between a disorienting modern society and a lost “organic” society rooted in landed estates.<sup>189</sup> Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American *picaros*, by contrast, wander a terrain that bore no material traces of the feudal past from which they have been estranged. Instead, the sparsely settled American territory that Captain Farrago and other early American *picaros* traverse evokes a relentlessly dislocating present beset by questions about whether and how either protagonist or reader could establish stable, coherent ties to each other and to the American soil.

In the early nineteenth century, literary critics frequently linked the question of whether and how organic polities could form in the absence of hereditary property ownership to ongoing debates about whether democracy would prevent the United States from developing the raw materials necessary to sustain a national literature. Some critics celebrated an American landscape whose young settlements “tell. . . you no tale of days that are gone by.” These critics contended that American writers could find the materials for a national fiction in the United States’ many regional character types. As a result, American literature did not need “gorgeous palaces and cloud capped towers,” “monuments of Gothic pride, mouldering in solitary grandeur,” “ravages of desolating conquests,” and other “traces of the slow and wasteful hands of time.”<sup>190</sup> Many others, however, believed the variety of characters necessary to represent a polity in fiction could only emerge through an “established order” tied to an organic past through ancestral properties. Since democratized property ownership could not be reconciled with that fantasy of “cloud capped towers,” many writers feared that Americans, both within

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<sup>188</sup> Richard Bjornson, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 15. Scholars have disputed whether “picaresque” should refer merely to a select handful of sixteenth-century Spanish novels or to a far more capacious set of first-person narratives about the *picaro*-narrator’s wanderings at society’s margins. They have likewise disagreed about who counts as a *picaro*, with some excluding any but lower-class rogues and others allowing wanderers of loftier social stations such as Don Quixote and Tom Jones. On the instability and capaciousness of the picaresque as a genre category, see George Rousseau, “Smollett and the Picaresque: Some Questions about a Label,” *Studies in Burke and His Time* 12, no. 3 (1971): 1886-1904.

<sup>189</sup> The usage of “organic” here follows Georg Lukács, who imagines that in the pre-modern era the self’s “organic” integration into the world it inhabits generated a sense of wholeness, *The Theory of the Novel*, 1920, trans. Anna Bostok (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1971).

<sup>190</sup> “ART. XII. – The Spy,” *North American Review*, 252-3.

fiction and without, might forever remain so many Captain Farragos, wandering without meaningful ties to each other nor to the soil.

When Bird adopted the eighteenth-century British model, rather than that of earlier American picaresques like *Modern Chivalry*, he entered this critical debate head on. *Sheppard Lee*'s early chapters trace what seems at first to be Lee's transformation from a small-time landowner, indistinguishable from the countless others whose plots proliferated during the early nineteenth century, into an idealized landed gentleman – an American version of *Tom Jones*'s Squire Allworthy. Lee's father had created Lee's estate – as narrator Lee explains – by enlarging his initial forty-acre plot into a “market-farm, raising fine fruits and vegetables, and such other articles as are most in demand in a city.” Having “succeeded beyond his highest expectations,” Lee's father died “a rich man.”<sup>191</sup> Crucially, though, when Lee inherits this estate, he does not take over his father's farming business but rather hands over management of the business to an overseer. Doing so was essential for anyone hoping to be recognized as a “gentleman,” since, as Lee (while inhabiting the body of a Philadelphia gentleman named I.D. Dawkins, Esq.) puts it, one who labors at agriculture “can never expect to be made respectable.”<sup>192</sup> Lee also takes up the customs of Britain's landed gentry: he hunts small game, breeds horses, and takes a “grand tour” of the Eastern seaboard, all while heading up an estate which sustains himself, the overseer, a black servant, and the servant's wife. Through Lee's transformation into a country gentleman, *Sheppard Lee* points to how early American properties might one day produce harmoniously integrated local societies whose class differences seem permanent and organic. In doing so, it suggests how such “little commonwealths” might yet enable the agreeable variety of characters found in British novels to spring from America's newly settled soil.<sup>193</sup>

However, the aversion to business requisite for Lee to maintain his gentlemanly status makes it impossible for him to sustain his gentlemanly property. The overseer he hires allows the farm to go to ruin: “orchards rot . . . away without being replanted,” “meadows [are] converted to swamps,” “improvements fell into decay,” and soon “receipts began to run short of . . . expenses.”<sup>194</sup> To support himself and his servants, Lee sells off the estate bit by bit until his 1500-acre inheritance is reduced to the original 40-acre plot his father purchased. That remainder he mortgages, only to find the farm in foreclosure when he cannot afford the payments. As his property disintegrates, his social status likewise crumbles: doctors and lawyers, whose “jocular familiarity” annoyed Lee when his large estate entitled him to social deference, now greet him coolly. In some cases, they even refuse to acknowledge him at all.<sup>195</sup> Recognizing the precariousness of his situation, Lee undertakes a series of increasingly desperate efforts to rescue his property and social standing. These culminate in a late-night search for the pirated treasure of “Captain Kidd,” during which he fatally injures himself. He survives – if it

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<sup>191</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 9.

<sup>192</sup> *ibid.*, 162.

<sup>193</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 136.

<sup>194</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 16.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, 24.



can be called that – only by projecting himself into the body of the expired Squire Higginson, thus abandoning his land and the aristocratic life he led on it entirely.

Through this account of how Lee's gentlemanly distinction rises and falls in concert with his estate, Bird aligns himself with critics who believed democratized land ownership would never produce the class distinctions necessary to sustain American novels. Lee's shaky purchase on gentlemanly status and manners is grounded not in an ancient seat but a generation-old "market farm" whose rapid expansion supports the claim that, in Jacksonian America, any white male, regardless of pedigree, might find himself a wealthy landowner. This democratic fusion of stumbling *nouveau riche* gentility with properties still dependent on the vicissitudes of commerce does not readily foster "little commonwealths," Lee's travails suggest. Instead, Lee's efforts to establish himself socially actually undermine his estate and its fledgling community by straining its reserves: a conman fleeces him during his grand tour; horses lead him into gambling debts; he must compensate a neighbor for accidentally shooting a cow while hunting; and he is later prosecuted and fined for "kill[ing] a woodcock too early in the summer."<sup>196</sup>

Moreover, within a democratized American society, the practical realities of building up a hereditary estate often conflicted with the aristocratic lifestyle. Maintaining the farm requires labor that Lee, fancying himself a gentleman, spurns. And Lee's best prospect for a wife is the eldest of a large and decidedly ungentrified brood of children on an up-and-coming farm – a fact that leads him to refuse marriage altogether and spurn the landed gentleman's obligation to leave an heir. In short, Lee's inherited "market farm" fails to transform him into a Squire Allworthy capable of superintending his land and the budding community residing on it. As a result, Lee cannot in turn transform that property into an established estate, replete with cloud-capped towers. Instead, the farm's "little commonwealth" fails to take root and disintegrates. Dissolved along with it are the emerging class differences that accompany the promise of a stable, interconnected local society. Without such differences, critics feared, American novels would never attain the pleasing "variety" of characters found in British fiction.

Yet, *Sheppard Lee* complicates, even as it affirms, this critical truism by investigating the gaps and incongruities between the ancestral properties many American literary critics idealized, the concept of property underpinning the United States' founding ideals, and the realities of property ownership in Jacksonian America. According to the *Second Treatise of Government*, an individual earns the right to enclose property by improving uncultivated "waste," of the sort Locke imagined the American wilderness to be, which in turn becomes the basis of the commonwealth formed for its protection.<sup>197</sup> In other words, the Lockean polity arises from the property of individuals who claim and cultivate land that would otherwise have gone unused. However, reconciling existing American properties with Locke's ideals was impossible given the reality, exemplified in the novel by Lee's plan to pay his debts by discovering lost pirate treasure: most of these properties derived not from Lockean enclosure but from attempts to extract unearned wealth from land whose ownership was arbitrary. Adjacent to the

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<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>197</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 116.

swamp where Lee searches for Captain Kidd's treasure are the ruins of a church and graveyard "built by the Swedes many a year ago" on land that Lee tells readers was "once mine."<sup>198</sup> Both the depiction of Lee's attempt at wealth extraction and the allusion to "New Sweden," which was lost to the Dutch before the Dutch in turn lost it to the British, highlight the arbitrariness of Lee's claim to his nearby farm; like all Americans, Lee's title would have been ultimately traceable not to Lockean enclosure but to vagaries of colonization such as royal land grants and wars between European powers.

Subsequent chapters focusing on Philadelphia gentlemen tease out how such arbitrary and extractive patterns of land ownership stymied the development of organic ancestral estates. These arbitrary claims to land created a mixed and mobile elite that was fundamentally disconnected from the American land on which its wealth and social distinctions ultimately rested. In *Sheppard Lee's* Philadelphia, there is no stable cadre of gentlemen who share Squire Allworthy's manners, status, and gentlemanly role as head of a "little commonwealth." Rather, credit and land speculation have democratized access to paper money and gentlemanly status.<sup>199</sup> As a result, a rube can arrive on Market Street exclaiming, "Ods bobs!" and, with sufficient funds, become respectable. Meanwhile, a Chesterfieldian man of society who squanders an inheritance of bonds and cash might end up so broke and hounded by creditors that suicide seems his only option. The very fact that Squire Higginson's body is available for Lee's spirit to claim results from the disconnections between this democratic reality and the idealized forms of property ownership imagined to underpin organic "little commonwealths." While Higginson profits from buying, selling and investing in "lands, houses, stocks, . . . and coal-mines," he never bothers to build up a country estate of his own.<sup>200</sup> Higginson dies as a direct result of his failure to establish a landed estate commensurate with his gentlemanly paper wealth: he can indulge in the gentlemanly sport of hunting only by trespassing on others' land, and he falls while climbing over someone else's "old . . . fence."<sup>201</sup>

*Sheppard Lee's* Southern chapters likewise reveal troubling disconnections between the ideal of the "little commonwealth," Locke's insistence that the right to claim and enclose property followed from agricultural labor, and the realities of land ownership in the United States. The closest Lee comes to belonging to a "little commonwealth" is during his time in the body of the slave Tom, who resides at Ridgewood Hill, a "romantic" plantation with an "ancient" main abode.<sup>202</sup> The plantation's beloved, gentlemanly master heads a community whose affective ties are rooted in enduring relationships that developed organically over generations: the master is "put over [his slaves] by birth, and not by purchase; for he lived upon the land occupied by his fathers before him, and his slaves were the descendants of those who had served them."<sup>203</sup> Yet, built and run not by cultivators at liberty to do what they choose but by men unable to claim even their own lives as their property, Ridgewood Hill requires only a nudge from

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<sup>198</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 28-9.

<sup>199</sup> See Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 206-209, 443-5.

<sup>200</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 162.

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, 338.

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, 341.

a smuggled abolitionist pamphlet to erupt into a bloody revolt.<sup>204</sup> Together, then, the deaths of Ridgewood's master and Squire Higginson suggest that neither paper wealth nor slave plantations could substitute for or stably form the hereditary properties that ground British fiction, however much the American aristocracy might superficially resemble Britain's landed gentlemen.

The unease that permeates the properties on which rest the wealth and social distinction of *Sheppard Lee's* gentlemen likewise permeates the language of ownership through which the novel describes Lee claiming and inhabiting others' bodies. Take, for example, Lee's account of the moment his disembodied spirit stumbled on the corpse of Squire Higginson:

The body, as it lay there in the bushes, was perfectly useless to him, and to all the world beside; and my spirit, as was clear enough, was in a similar predicament. Why might I not, that is to say, my spirit – deprived by an unhappy accident of its natural dwelling – take possession of a tenement which there remained no spirit to claim?<sup>205</sup>

That Lee sees the corpse as “perfectly useless to” Squire Higginson and “all the world beside” casts Lee's metempsychosis in terms of Lockean enclosure. In Lee's terms, Higginson's body is an unoccupied waste. His right to “take possession” of the corpse, then, follows from the same principles as the property claims of individuals who clear and farm plots in what formerly was regarded as unoccupied forest.

However, in likening his own body to a “natural dwelling” and Squire Higginson's to a “mere tenement,” Lee hints that such an act of appropriation might not result in organic connection to the new domicile. Both terms cast bodies as residences, linking the homeless Lee's metempsychosis to his need for a new property on which to live. Yet a “natural dwelling” and a “mere tenement” are very different types of habitations. By describing his own body as a “natural dwelling,” Lee suggests he has an organic relationship to it. In contrast, Squire Higginson's body is to Lee a “mere tenement,” a temporary residence that he inhabits and has a legal right to but which gives no sense of home. In characterizing the two bodies so differently, Lee implies that claiming and owning land on Locke's terms, while it might give one legal title, did not necessarily generate a lasting connection between a person and the land owned. The subsequent volume bears this concern out, as, uneasy not only in Higginson's gout-

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<sup>204</sup> Locke's exact stance on slavery is uncertain. While his *First Treatise* claims that “Slavery is ... vile,” the *Second Treatise* argues that in a state of war the “conqueror” has “absolute power” over the “lives of those he overcomes,” meaning that the conqueror might justifiably choose to enslave rather than kill the combatants he captures, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 7, 181. Many scholars point to Locke's authorship of “The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina” for a slave-owning colony as evidence that Locke condoned slavery, or at least the slave trade, which operated on the fiction that slaves sold in African ports had all been captured in war. However, scholars dispute whether “The Fundamental Constitutions” represents Locke's own views or those of his patrons. Moreover, Locke's argument in the *Second Treatise* that conquered combatants forfeit only their own lives and that conquerors have no right to the lives or property of non-combatants is impossible to reconcile with the American practice of enslaving from birth the descendants of slaves brought from Africa.

<sup>205</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 52.

ridden body but also with his wife and the obligations of his gentlemanly lifestyle, Lee first contemplates suicide and then chooses instead to project his spirit into a new body, that of the Chesterfieldian dandy, I.D. Dawkins, whose gentlemanly manners mask his massive debts.

Through Lee's uneasy occupation of these gentlemen's bodies, *Sheppard Lee's* metempsychosis addresses a number of unresolved questions about the relationship between property ownership and idealized "little commonwealths." Key among them: Did the formation of "little commonwealths," whose organic class distinctions and cloud-capped towers enthralled early American literary critics, require properties rooted in Lockean enclosure of wild waste? If so, what transformed an uneasily occupied "tenement" into a "natural dwelling"? If not, how did the organic connections entailed in idealized landed estates replete arise? And in either case, how did the fact that, in Jacksonian America, men like Lee could acquire the lives, manners, wealth, and stature of gentlemen *without* firm connections to landed estates shape both American society itself and the ways in which its polity might be represented as a set of characters? How, in other words, did the forms of inhabitation enabled by democratized property ownership remake both the lived experience of gentlemen and the framework that had made gentlemen central to literary and electoral representation?

*Sheppard Lee* explores these questions and their implications for representation rooted in the character sketch tradition through the peculiar interactions between Lee's "spirit" and the material substrates of his character as Lee moves from one body to another. Depictions of Lee's metempsychosis have attracted attention primarily for how drastically his character changes as the habits and traits of his new bodies' former inhabitants intermingle with and all but overpower his own. However, in focusing on how, as Looby puts it, Lee's "consciousness... was controlled to a large degree by its material embodiment," critics tend to overlook the fact that the material aspects of Lee's newfound bodies do not wholly determine who he is.<sup>206</sup> In fact, an excess of spirit produces a discrepancy between Lee's character and that of the body it inhabits, as Lee's description of dwelling in Squire Higginson's body reveals:

Although I had acquired along with his body all the peculiarities of feeling, propensity, conversation, and conduct of Squire Higginson, I had not entirely lost those that belonged to Sheppard Lee. In fact, I may be said to have possessed, at that time, two different characters, one of which now governed me, and now the other; though the squire's, it must be confessed, was greatly predominant. . . . The difficulty was, that I could not immediately shake off my old Sheppard Lee habits; and the influence of these, perhaps (if one must scrutinize into the matter), more than the absolute retention of any other native peculiarities, drove me into . . . inconsistencies.<sup>207</sup>

"Scrutin[y] into the matter" of Lee's character reveals that character to be generated by an unsettling mixture of Lee's traits and those of the corpse he claims and inhabits. Lee's old memories, habits, and consciousness persist to some degree, despite his having settled

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<sup>206</sup> Looby, Introduction to *Sheppard Lee*, xvii.

<sup>207</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 59.

into a new “tenement” where his character must adjust to the “peculiarities of feeling, propensity, conversation, and conduct” of its former occupant.

In depicting how Lee’s character forms from this unstable mixture, *Sheppard Lee* yokes the inconsistencies and contradictions in how Jacksonian America’s gentlemen owned property to an aesthetic problem addressed by eighteenth-century theorists of the character sketch: how did the many different traits that comprised a character form a coherent whole? Gally attributed that coherence to “Master-Passion[s],” whose centrality to a person’s character unified without erasing the differences between the many distinct “under Passions” with which “the Heart of Man is frequently actuated.” Gally explains:

[T]he same Object does, by its different Position, afford to the Spectator different Representations, so does the same Affection of the Mind, by exerting it self after a different manner, lay a real Foundation for so many distinct Characters. The under Passions may, by their various Operations, cause some Diversity in the Colour and Complexion of the Whole, but ‘tis the Master-Passion which must determine the Character.

Since therefore the under Parts of a Character are not essential, they may or may not be reciprocal. A covetous Man may be impudent, or he may have some share of Modesty left: on the other Hand, an impudent Man may be generous, or his Character may be stain’d by Avarice. And therefore to make the Features of one Virtue or Vice enter, as under Parts, into the Character of another Virtue or Vice, is so far from being a Transgression of the Nature of Things, that, on the contrary, all the Nicety of *Characteristic-Writing*, and all the Beauty which arises from the Variety of an agreeable Mixture, entirely depends on *this*. The main Difficulty consists in making the Master-Passion operate so conspicuously throughout the Whole, as that the Reader may, in every step of the Performance, immediately discover it.<sup>208</sup>

In this account, “Master-Passion[s]” serve much the same role *within* a character as the idealized gentleman does within the collection of characters comprising the polity: each is a specialized instance of the larger set it is a member of and, as a result, is simultaneously a participant in and superior to the other components of that collective. Likewise, each brings coherence to that diverse whole through a centralizing organizational force that its superior position enables it to “exert.” Key to the ability of “Master-Passion[s]” to govern individual characters in this manner is the maintenance of a clear distinction between those “Master-Passion[s]” and the many different “under parts” of a character. Only by rendering a “Master-Passion . . . conspicuously” could a writer coherently depict a given character as a “Whole.”

Through Lee’s metempsychosis, *Sheppard Lee* explores what happens to the representation of character when democratized property ownership confounds and destabilizes such clear hierarchical distinctions. Take, for example, Lee’s account of the changes his spirit undergoes within the bodies of Squire Higginson, I.D. Dawkins, and usurious moneylender Abram Skinner. Modifying Locke’s vision of property formation, in which a farmer “mix[es] his labor with the soil,” Lee’s depictions of claiming and

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<sup>208</sup> Gally, “Critical Essay,” 33-35.

inhabiting other men's corpses suggest that property ownership also changes owners.<sup>209</sup> The result is a scenario in which the boundaries between spirit and matter, between one character and another, and between one property and another are porous and shifting. As Lee explains:

The spirit of Abram Skinner had left such a taint of rascality in his body, that my own was thoroughly imbued with it; from which I infer that a man's body is like a barrel, which if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of everything you put into it afterward. A grain of lying or thieving, or any such spicy propensity, infused into the youthful breast by a tender parent, will give a scent to the spirit for life. . . . Abram Skinner destroyed every trait that had belonged to Sheppard Lee; and as for those I had taken from John H. Higginson and I.D. Dawkins, they were lost in the like manner.<sup>210</sup>

Here, Lee describes himself as a messy amalgamation of many men's spirits and bodies. Before Lee enters Skinner's corpse, the bodies Lee inhabits add "traits" to Lee's spirit that persist when he moves on to new corporeal dwellings. These bodies consequently reverse the causality Locke establishes in the *Second Treatise*; when Lee claims a new body as property, it remakes *him*, changing his spirit's character into something new.

Yet, no simple reversal of Locke's logic can account for the effects of ownership on Lee's character since Skinner's spirit manages to leave "a taint of rascality in his [own] body" that then overpowers, not only Lee's recently created traits, but also the many that originally "had belonged to... Lee." In other words, Skinner's spirit not only alters the character of Skinner's body, just as Locke's owner altered the land he claims, but also, through that body, modifies the character of *Lee's* spirit. To the extent that Higginson's and Dawkins' spirits have fused with Lee's, Skinner's overpowering spirit alters theirs as well. Through this muddled chain of influence, *Sheppard Lee* suggests that, in a Jacksonian America shaped by democratized and incongruous notions of property ownership, within any one spirit, character, body, or property countless other spirits, characters, bodies, and properties acting on one another might be at work.

Through depictions of how within such an environment Lee, as Edgar Allan Poe put it, "very awkwardly, partially loses, and partially does not lose, his identity, at each transmigration," *Sheppard Lee* renders concrete the rhetoric of body, spirit, and character that pervaded discourse around elected bodies, both individual and collective, during the 1830s.<sup>211</sup> This discourse in part reflected optimism about America's "public spirit," which Alexis de Tocqueville famously argued was essential to democracy's function. Such a spirit, Tocqueville explains, rests on an "immaterial and immortal principle" that keeps men from falling into the seductive creed "that all is nothing but matter." Without belief in such a principle, Tocqueville insisted, the American people would fail to cultivate the enlarged sense of self-interest necessary for a functioning civic life. Instead, Americans would merely advance their own narrowly construed material interests, and American democracy would degenerate into the fractious materialism toward which all

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<sup>209</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 111.

<sup>210</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 209.

<sup>211</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Critical Notices," *Southern Literary Messenger* 2, no. 10 (Sept 1836): 666.

“democratic nations are propelled.”<sup>212</sup> (519-520). As such, in one sense *Sheppard Lee*’s attention to the persistence of an immaterial spirit within Lee’s metempsychotic transformations merely affirms and translates into concrete terms the democratic “spirit,” not reducible to mere matter, that Americans increasingly imagined was essential to civic life in a democracy.<sup>213</sup>

However, *Sheppard Lee*’s depictions of that excess spirit – especially the incongruities surrounding its relationship to bodies, property, and character – also dramatized the metaphors of firmness and corporeal influence through which the Right of Instruction debates cast the confusing relationships between the United States’ many individual and collective elected bodies. Judge Joseph Hopkinson’s description of an idealized senator’s process of deliberation, in an essay for Poe’s *Southern Literary Messenger*, typified the confusion in how opponents of the Right of Instruction imagined the relationships between elected bodies:

[The senator] must carefully and conscientiously examine the whole ground, and finally decide for himself on the double responsibility he owes to his own State and to the United States; to those who appointed him to office and to himself, and his own character. There is no doubt that this examination will be made with a disposition sufficiently inclined to conform himself to the wishes of his constituents.<sup>214</sup>

Here, as Hopkinson understands it, a Senator constantly negotiates multiple and shifting demands that pit “his own character” against the shifting desires of his constituents, as well as the interests of both his home State and the United States as a whole. As was common among those who opposed the Right of Instruction, Hopkinson insisted that senators’ independence was essential to fulfilling this “double” – or, really, multiply mediated – “responsibility.” The Senate’s collective legislative decisions could have integrity, this logic held, only if state legislatures did not intervene into the messy amalgamation of constituents’ political influence, obligation to state and national interests, and individual character that shaped senators’ votes. Faith that this mystified process would produce outcomes in the national interest, in turn, rested on the presumption that, as members of the more aristocratic of the United States’ national legislative bodies, senators had a privileged access to that which lends both individual characters and sets of characters integrity and coherence. By enacting that coherence within the messy set of influences and traits shaping their individual political characters,

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<sup>212</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835-1840, transl. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 519-20.

<sup>213</sup> The second volume of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* references metempsychosis in its discussion of this public spirit. So essential was a belief in an immaterial spirit to fostering democratic civil life, Tocqueville declared, that “if a democracy ever had to make a choice” between “metempsychosis” and “materialism,” “I would judge that its citizens brutalize themselves less, by thinking that their soul is going to pass into the body of a pig than in believing it is nothing,” *ibid.*, 519-520. However, because publication of that volume post-dated the publication of *Sheppard Lee*, it is unlikely Bird had Tocqueville’s discussion of metempsychosis in mind when he composed the novel.

<sup>214</sup> Judge Joseph Hopkinson, “The Right of Instruction,” *Southern literary messenger; devoted to every department of literature and the fine arts* 2, no. 7 (June 1836): 405.

they in turn made it possible for the Senate to collectively achieve that coherence on behalf of the American polity.

Proponents of the Right of Instruction, by contrast, held that such mystical reliance on senators' gentlemanly capacity to disinterestedly represent the American people as a whole was undemocratic and that, instead, state legislatures more immediately beholden to the local electorate should be allowed to dictate senators' votes. Yet, while such legislative instruction promised to demystify the obscure process through which aristocratic senators represented the people as a whole, it raised new questions about the mechanism through which a public, democratic spirit might influence the character of state legislative bodies and, through them, the Senate. For example, how would a state legislature ensure that its instructions accurately represented its electorate's character? Through party machinery? Or popular referendum? And would senators be bound to consult with their state legislatures on each vote, or could they vote according to their own character and beliefs unless they received direct instructions? With these questions left unanswered, the Right of Instruction did not resolve questions about how Senators created a coherent representation of the American polity, but rather merely displaced them onto state-level electoral representation, whose mechanisms for democratic representation were equally, albeit differently, mystified. Moreover, in doing so, the Right of Instruction also raised troubling questions about the Senate's integrity as an elected body, since if state legislatures dictated some or all of the individual senators' votes, then electorally influencing the Senate's collective representation would be numerous state-level legislative bodies.

Opponents of the Right of Instruction described such impingement on the integrity of individual senators and the Senate as a whole in terms corporeal influence that verged on metempsychosis. Hopkins, for example, asserted that "binding representatives" to state legislatures' dictates would "fetter . . . the powers of the federal body" and "reduce that body to a bloodless, fleshless skeleton." Permitting state legislatures to "compel" senators and the senatorial "body" in this manner would amount to conjuring a supernatural form of electoral obedience akin to that exercised by those with the "power to call spirits."<sup>215</sup> John Tyler, who in 1836 had resigned from the Senate rather than follow the Virginia legislature's instructions to expunge the censure of Andrew Jackson, described the Right of Instruction in similarly corporeal and supernatural terms. In his letter of resignation, Tyler argued that, under the Right of Instruction, "representatives of a sovereign State are . . . mere automata, as to move only when they are bidden, and to sit in their places like statues to record such edicts as may come to them."<sup>216</sup> Senators, in other words, become akin either to lifeless "statues" or, worse, to corpses taken over and compelled to do the bidding of an outside spirit.

This figurative language, centered on corporeal firmness and influence, framed discussions of how the United States' democratizing electoral system should amalgamate the bodies, properties, and public spirit that shaped its electorate's character. As

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<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*, 405, 408.

<sup>216</sup> John Tyler to the Speaker and Members of the General Assembly of Virginia, Washington, Feb. 29, 1836., quoted in Judge Joseph Hopkinson. "The Right of Instruction." *Southern literary messenger; devoted to every department of literature and the fine arts*. 2, no. 9 (Aug 1836): 531.



Hopkinson put it, in his account of the Senate's constitutional role as a check on fickle popular will:

[W]hat can that firmness avail, how will it be shaken, of what possible use will it be, if the Senator is bound to follow the dictates of a changing body, subject, emphatically to sudden impulses and seductions, at a distance from the scene of his deliberations[?] . . . Firmness in an agent who has no will of his own, no right to act but on the dictation of another, would not only be superfluous, but a positive evil and disqualification.<sup>217</sup>

As Hopkinson casts it, under the Right of Instruction, one unstable and “changing” body – the state legislature – would threaten a second, that of the senator himself, who, “act[ing]” on the dictation of another,” would have “no will of his own.” This lack of “firmness” would in turn threaten two more bodies: the Senate, in whose deliberations that senator continued to participate, and the nation, whose Constitution relied on “the permanency of [the Senate’s] body – from its independence and its elevation above, or protection from, the caprices and fluctuations of popular feeling, often improperly called popular opinion.” In short, key to the integrity of American electoral representation were bodies – both those of individual Senators and of the Senate as a whole – that could “conform . . . to the wishes of [their] constituents,” as Hopkinson earlier phrased it, without losing the “firmness” that prevented them from being metempsychotically overtaken by expressions of democratic spirit.

In dramatizing the unstable amalgamations of body and spirit that opponents of the Right of Instruction warned against, *Sheppard Lee* fused its engagement with ongoing literary debates about the effect of democratized property ownership on American character types to the era’s pressing political concerns about what Lee calls “the character of our institutions.” Early-nineteenth-century partisan discourse, like the era’s literary criticism, tended to frame all political affairs through an opposition between moneyed aristocracy and populist democracy.<sup>218</sup> Musing on the state of Jacksonian politics, Lee recapitulates this distinction by asking why “the folly of a feudal aristocracy [should] prevail under the shadow of a purely democratical government?” Yet, this strange passage – in which Lee also contemplates the “political evils which demagoguism, agrarianism, mobocracy, and all the other *isms* of a vulgar stamp have brought upon the land” – resists, even as it superficially affirms, this neat framework. The material basis of American democracy was in fact not material at all, or at least not purely so, *Sheppard Lee* suggests, if in the absence of landed estates, a “democratical” spirit grounded American politics.<sup>219</sup> Rather, underpinning that politics were democratized forms of property ownership whose unstable amalgamations of matter and spirit rendered the characters of both America’s gentlemen and its electorate deeply incoherent.

A crucial consequence of such democratization, *Sheppard Lee*’s engagements with the figure of the landed gentleman suggests, was the warping of how Americans conceived of those gentlemen and differentiated between those who followed

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<sup>217</sup> Judge Joseph Hopkinson. “The Right of Instruction.” *Southern literary messenger; devoted to every department of literature and the fine arts* 2, no. 7 (June 1836), 408.

<sup>218</sup> Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 306-8.

<sup>219</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 305-6.

Washington's gentlemanly example and those who did not. American campaign literature regularly invoked that notion of the gentleman through its allusions to Washington's moral character, unifying leadership, and gentlemanly bearing. However, without landed estates to ground the character of the disinterested gentleman in America, mentions in campaign biographies and pamphlets of the next Washington, a "second Washington," and the "Washington of the West" had no meaningful referent. To assert that a candidate was Washingtonian required a collectively agreed upon sense of, not only the character of Washington himself, but also which aspects of that character were necessary attributes for one who might fulfill the gentlemanly role of coherently unifying the characters within America's polity. In the early nineteenth century, the United States lacked that consensus and, even more troublingly, seemed entirely unable to form the hereditary landed estates that had anchored the character of the gentleman in Britain. As a result, anyone could appear to be that second Washington, even, to the horror of Whigs like Bird, Andrew Jackson, whose campaign materials and 1829, *Jackson Wreath; or National Souvenir*, celebrating Jackson's victory in the presidential election, cast him as second only to "the transcendent Washington."<sup>220</sup>

Such profound fractures in how Americans perceived which candidates were and were not Washingtonian, in part, reflected equally profound partisan and sectional divisions and anxieties about how single elections or the actions of a handful of elected representatives might permanently alter the United States' political center of gravity. Jackson's two presidential terms repeatedly brought those divisions to a head, especially during the Twenty-Third Congress (1833-35), when a Whig Senate majority repeatedly clashed with Jackson. As Jackson flouted senatorial efforts to check his executive power, even senators that had previously supported him, such as Senator Willie P. Magnum of North Carolina, began to express fears that if Whigs did not stand up to Jackson, "the power of resistance in the Senate would be lost and it will settle practically the Constitution in the South."<sup>221</sup> For an American polity so deeply divided, the question of who would be the next Washington – and, especially, from which part of the United States that Washingtonian leader would come and whose values he would champion – became a convenient frame through which to distill these broader anxieties about the direction of national politics.

However, to treat these electoral invocations of Washington as *merely* partisanship is to overlook how profoundly democratized forms of property ownership had destabilized the representational framework through which Americans imagined their polity. Without hereditary landed estates to clearly establish the gentleman's "master trait" as the disinterested head of a "little commonwealth," the character type of the American gentleman became jumbled, incoherent and, most importantly, subject to the conflicting perceptions of voters from across the country and in all corners of American

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<sup>220</sup> James M'Henry, *Jackson Wreath, or National Souvenir* (Philadelphia: Published by Jacob Maas, Franklin engraving office, 65, Arcade. William W. Weeks, printer, 1829), 9. For correspondence in which Bird criticizes the tyrannical Jackson, as well as Congress's failure to check his powers, see Robert Montgomery Bird Papers, UPenn Ms. Coll 108, Box 22, Folder 293.

<sup>221</sup> Quoted in Clement Eaton, "Southern Senators and the Right of Instruction, 1789-1860," *The Journal of Southern History* 18, no. 3 (Aug., 1952): 310.

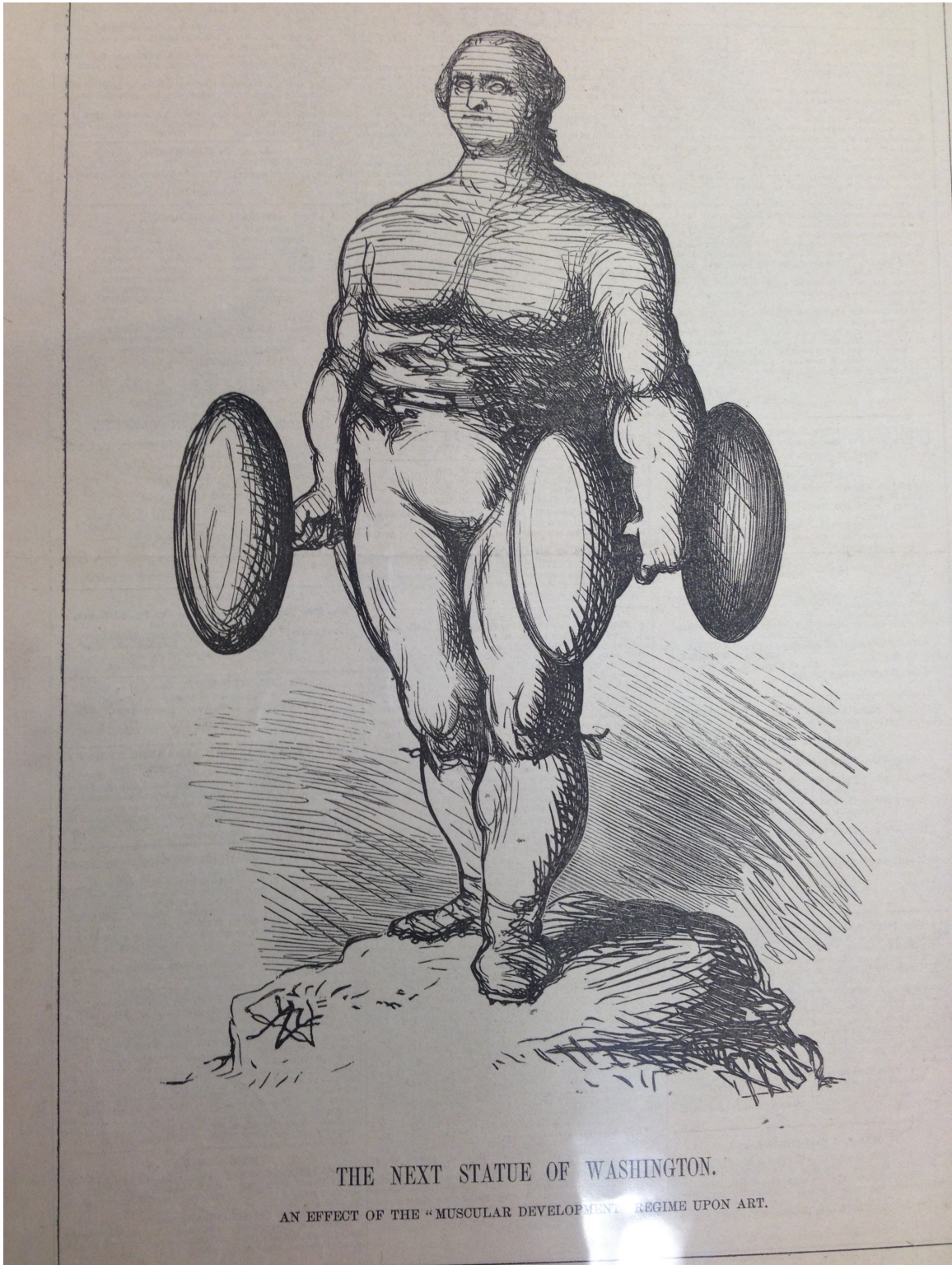


Figure 15: "The Next Statue of Washington. An Effect of the 'Muscular Development' Regime Upon Art." *The Daily Momus*. May 2, 1860.

society. So, too, did the more specific character type of the unifying Washingtonian leader. Where one voter might see the essence of Washington's character made manifest in a candidate, another could just as easily see that essence being warped or corrupted. In other words, at the very center of American electoral representation was a notion of a gentlemanly Washington that Americans lacked a shared framework for recognizing and conceiving.

Exemplifying this uneasy perceptual divide in how Americans perceived the Washingtonian gentlemen around which their electoral system was centered was a nineteenth-century cartoon of Washington as a bloated bodybuilder (Figure 15). Captioned "The Next Statue of Washington. An effect of the muscular development regime upon art," the cartoon sketches a marble statue with Washington's face and a muscular naked body. However, unlike the lean, trim figures of classical Greek statuary, this Washington holds a barbell and is beefy and muscular from bodybuilding, which became widely popular in the nineteenth-century United States. This craze for bodybuilding drew on and reinforced the notion, explored at length in *Sheppard Lee*, that bodies shaped character, which was intrinsically malleable.<sup>222</sup> The result, as this cartoon illustrates, was profound uncertainty about how Washington's gentlemanly character would take shape in the body of, for instance, "The Washington of the West." Was the cartoon's muscular Washington distorted caricature of Washington's gentlemanly stature or a true sketch of how his character – and those of the electorate his figured centered and unified – had transformed with the nineteenth-century's changing forms of embodiment and inhabitation? The cartoon does not settle the question but rather, in its refusal, underscores the radical destabilization of "the regime of art" through which the American polity recognized itself and its rightful leaders.

The result of such destabilization was a democratizing United States which, to repurpose Lee's words from Bird's notes to "Sheppard Lee in Congress," perpetually threatened to "produce more than one Washington." Without a shared representational framework through which to recognize Washingtonian leaders, some Americans could perceive Washington's character in, for example, Andrew Jackson, while at the very same time others saw that character in Jackson's most vocal Whig opponents. These divergences in perception resulted in an electorate that conceived of itself as having multiple, competing centers, none of which were clearly legitimate. No wonder, then, that in Bird's notes, Lee's exclamation on the Congress floor that the United States had produced more than one Washington gets Lee confined to an asylum. While a mythologized gentlemanly Washington promised a fantasy of electoral coherence, within a democratizing United States that fantasy was inextricable from the metempsychotic confusion that permeated American conceptions of the electorate and the United States' elected bodies.

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<sup>222</sup> See James B. Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

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