

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



Central Department of English
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal

URL: www.cdetu.edu.np

Review Article

The Rhetoric of Early American Ethnography: Framing Politics in the Texts by Crèvecoeur, Jefferson and Tyler

Bhushan Aryal, PhD 

Department of Languages and Literatures, Delaware State University, USA

Article History: Submitted 5 March 2022; Reviewed 2 June 2022; Revised 5 August 2022

Corresponding Author: Bhushan Aryal, Email: baryal@desu.edu

Copyright 2022 © The Author(s). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s). The work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). www.cdetu.edu.np



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v4i2.47426>

Abstract

This paper studies early American manners and customs chapters in the texts written by J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur, Thomas Jefferson, and Royall Tyler as precursors to ethnography, and demonstrates how these writers use ethnographic mode to explore their contemporary political issues. The paper argues that the ethnographic accounts in these chapters are less the objective representations of cultures than the political views shrouded in ethnographic modes. The argument then is that the chapters should be treated as rhetorical frames. To exemplify this argument, the paper analyzes Crèvecoeur's Nantucket sequence in *Letters from an American Farmer* and demonstrates its pro-capitalist political aspirations. The paper also takes up Jefferson's descriptions of Native Americans in *Notes on the States of Virginia* and shows how he used the ethnographic descriptions and scientific methodology to test whether the European settlers could prosper in the new land—particularly in the early nineteenth-century context of the theory of biological degeneration that assumed that a particular geographic context could determine the intellectual and moral aspects of a race. Finally, the paper reads the ethnographic accounts in Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* and demonstrates how the whole book was a persuasive attempt to solidify support for the strong national government amidst the continued opposition within American states to join the new federal structure instituted by the new 1789 Constitution.

Keywords: Rhetoric, ethnography, American manners and customs, political treatise

Introduction

Although ethnography as a discipline emerged later in the mid-nineteenth century, the early American writings display an obsession with documenting human manners and customs. As European explorers traveled into unfamiliar cultures, they reported their observations to European readers. The differences they reported prompted contemplation, giving birth to ethnographic descriptions. Indeed, modern ethnography has its roots in colonial encounters, like the ones found in the descriptions of native populations by early explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca (Woolf 59-88). However, the scanty occasional ethnological

reporting before the formation of the United States entered into an intense enterprise during the early national period, particularly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. While this period and the writers that this paper analyzes have been one of the most commented on in American literary scholarship, the ethnographic dimension and the racialized nature of those narratives have eluded our field's attention.

In this paper, I read the descriptions of manners and customs in J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*. As Gordon Wood has written extensively, the phase in which these texts were written was one of the most unsettled periods in American history, and writers from the period were trying to define the uncharted political and cultural conditions. It is in this vein, the chapters on the manners and customs in these texts use three different cultures to make political comments. Crèvecoeur, Jefferson and Tyler frame their ethnographic accounts as political and cultural experiments rather than preserving them as disinterested observations of the cultures they were representing. Undoubtedly, they project objectivity, but a closer analysis reveals their political and philosophical motivations. "Description of the Island of Nantucket, with Manners, Customs, Policy, and Trade of the Inhabitants," Crèvecoeur's Nantucket sequence, for instance, is an allegory of political thought that argues in favor of capitalism, although the version of capitalism discussed in the text is tempered with the language of classical republicanism. In the sequence, he engages with questions that continue to be relevant today: what is the best form of government? Does that form of government emerge from human nature? What should be the place of government in people's lives? In the same vein, Jefferson approaches his Native American ethnography with some government-related questions. Scientific methodology, with its predilection for quantitative representation that would be the defining characteristic of modern ethnography, is in full deployment in Jefferson. However, his major concern is the European future in the new land. He looks in Native Americans for the signs of assurance—in external edifices like monuments and in internal traits like eloquence and equanimity—to know whether the cultural planting of the European past is feasible in the American future, especially in the context of the eighteenth-century theory of biological degeneration. Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* was certainly written after the promulgation of the Constitution in 1789 that officially established the strong national government, but the opposition to centralized power continued. In the book, Tyler responds to that debate by using North African ethnography to make an argument in favor of a stronger federal government. Tyler frames his narrator's engagement with the Muslim other to advocate for how states can come together without rescinding their independence and why such cohesion was needed to ward off the challenges posed by the chaotic international order.

This kind of reading—combining literary and nonliterary texts and treating them as representations of cultures and human motives—has become possible because of new methodologies in ethnography that have broadened the field's scope, reopening the relationship among literature, cultural studies and historiography. Not only have these new methodologies complicated the nature of representation—particularly in the aftermath of deconstructionist and postmodernist understandings of language, power and ideology—by narrowing the disciplinary differences, but also have revealed how materials thought to have belonged to one discipline could be of use to another discipline, sometimes dramatically altering its dominant views. Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of American Revolution*, where he studies letters and pamphlets and makes a significant historical reinterpretation, is a quick example of this trend. This methodological opening has shifted the function of ethnography from "an experimental science in search of law" to "an interpretive one" (Geertz 5). As James Clifford elaborates, in this trend "ethnographic writing is allegorical at the level both of its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied by its mode of textualization)" (98). Geertz's and Clifford's theorization expand ethnography's interpretive functions. Johannes Fabian extends this interpretive possibility even further when he accentuates the role of ethnographer's intellectual and methodological frame.

For him, an ethnography can be helpful to uncover ethnographers' worldviews rather than for knowing the cultures objectively represented in their texts (Fabian 85). In this formulation, ethnography becomes a rhetorical mode that writers can use to persuade their readers. Based on this theorization, this paper foregrounds some of the political motives in the selected early American "ethnographic" texts.

The Rhetoric of Crèvecoeur

Crèvecoeur's *Letters* has generated a substantial discussion about the truth-value of its account, complex biography of its author and its difficult adjustment within genre categories (Mysers 211-15; White 379; Rice 91). More complicated has been the Nantucket sequence. Its objective, the proto-ethnographic tone, compromises its placement within imaginative literature and its obvious focus on "manners and customs" inhibits political readings that the preceding and following sections encourage. This middle section appears an odd presence in an otherwise coherent narrative. The critics have different understanding about the section: Nathaniel Philbrick finds the sequence full of objectivity. He also rejects the conventional interpretation of the Nantucket section as a digression from the main plot, arguing that the sequence perfectly serves as the middle as it "subtly and then directly challenges the optimistic vision of the book's beginning and contributes significantly to Crèvecoeur's gradual unfolding tale of disillusionment" (415). Thomas Philbrick, however, thinks that the Nantucket Island is only tangentially related to the narrator's experience. For Jennifer Schell, "the Nantucket Islanders are representative of the American spirit because of the kind of physical labor they perform" in Crèvecoeur's "attempt to survey American space ... figuratively" (582). While Philbrick acknowledges that "the Farmer approaches Nantucket Island as if it were a sociological experiment" and Schell interprets the Islanders as "representative of American spirit," the critics have not foregrounded the political philosophy that Crèvecoeur develops in this section.

This paper argues that this odd middle section is the most significant part to understand Crèvecoeur's political philosophy. Deploying ethnographic mode, Crèvecoeur frames this "manners and customs sequence" as an experiment to demonstrate the efficacy of emerging capitalism, particularly to illustrate his thesis that capitalism is naturally conducive to human nature. For this purpose, he subdues the role of other components—particularly the productivity of land, which manifests when Nantucket is juxtaposed with Pennsylvania and Charleston of preceding and following sections respectively.

Crèvecoeur sets his political project straight early in the section. Instead of reporting on the general human condition of the time, his objective is "to inquire by what means they [the Nantucket inhabitants] have raised themselves from... the most insignificant beginnings, to the ease and wealth" (58). As we follow him, the "means" that he is claiming for Nantucket prosperity is not any natural object, scientific invention, or physical attribute. For him, the credit goes to the political system on the island. He writes:

This singular establishment [the progress made of European settlers on the island] has been effected by means of native industry and perseverance common to all men, when they are protected by a government which demands but little from its protection; when they are permitted to enjoy a system of rational laws founded on perfect freedom. The mildness and humanity of such a government necessarily implies that confidence which is the source of the most arduous undertakings and permanent success. (58)

On the next page, he contrasts this rosy picture of prosperity with an imaginative scenario under the different contexts of traditional monarchy and feudalism:

Had this island been contiguous to the shores of some ancient monarchy, it would only have been occupied by a few wretched fishermen, who oppressed by poverty, would hardly been able to purchase or build little fishing barks; always dreading the weight of taxes, or the servitude men-of-war. Instead of that boldness of speculation for which the inhabitants of this island are so remarkable, they would fearlessly have confined themselves, within the narrow limits of the most trifling attempts; timid in their excursions, they never could have extricated themselves from their first difficulties. (59)

In this contrastive political arrangement, the writer shows a difference between the feudal political economy of the European past and the emerging free-market economy of the new world and demonstrates how the new system would be conducive to building a prosperous society released from the oppressive monarchical governments that defined Europe during that time. As he puts it, this achievement on the island is a wonder: “who would have imagined” (58). Interpreted from this perspective, the Nantucket section emerges as a political allegory that uses ethnographic elements to forward a political thesis, the Nantucket prosperity standing for the revolutionary potential inherent in the new system that could be implanted anywhere irrespective of climate and geographical differences.

To accentuate the formative possibilities of this system, Crèvecoeur suppresses the role of other variables on the island. For instance, the most prominently repressed is the productivity of the land. Unlike other places of the continent described in *Letters*, Nantucket Island is barren and naturally unworthy of agriculture. He writes, the “island furnishes the naturalist with a few or no objects worthy of observation” (62). Barren naturally as well as historically, the island in itself has nothing to offer; all achievement is predicated on human ingenuity and their political condition. Thus, “though it is barren in soil, insignificant in its extent, inconvenient in its situation, deprived of materials for building; it seems to have inhabited merely to prove what mankind can do when happily governed!” (57). Indeed, the general infertility of the Island allows Crèvecoeur to magnify his argument that capitalism is conducive to human nature to create a productive and harmonious society. In a way, it is an idealistic proposition grounded in Cartesian cogito that posits the system of governance as the sole basis of human condition. Putting it another way, the proposition for the author becomes this: even if the Nantucket Island can offer so much with “perfect freedom,” what other more conducive places would generate with such condition?

While Crèvecoeur may present his political theory as the product of his “speculative inquiries,” the method he adopts is that of a scientific laboratory. He controls all other variables by keeping them constant and non-contributory. Nothing nonhuman—including the land—intrudes his description or experiment. The “happy settlement” on the island is the pure function of nothing else, but “their freedom, their skill, their probity, and perseverance, have accomplished everything, and brought them by degrees to rank they now hold” (59). In doing so, Crèvecoeur establishes a scientific basis for his political thought, proving the universal applicability of capitalism. The ethnographic mode reinforces the purpose further because instead of being just a logical treatise of political arguments, the Nantucket sequence becomes a concrete manifestation of what could happen when a political philosophy is allowed to operate without any hindrances.

To strengthen the coherence of his treatise, Crèvecoeur needed to solve another conundrum—the question of property rights and the existence of Native Americans. The land may not have contributed much, but for capitalism to work, the Islanders needed to be the rightful owners, particularly in the intellectual paradigm established by John Locke’s liberalism and classical republicanism. Unequivocally, Crèvecoeur states that this society is established “on an ideal” of property rights (62). The narrator James is mindful that Native Americans, who “appear to be a race doomed to recede and disappear before the superior genius of the Europeans,” originally owned this land (69). But careful not to scar the major ideal on which “the people’s government, industry, mode of living” (66) here has operated, he does not blame the current

residents for appropriating the land. Though the wavering language of uncertainty dominates otherwise straightforward confident prose in course of dealing with this topic, he keeps the current Islanders unequivocally blameless: “It is uncertain whether the original right of the Earl of Sterling, or that of the Duke of York, was founded on fair purchase of the soil or not; whatever injustice might have been committed in that respect, cannot be charged to the account of those Friends who purchased from others” (66). While the issue whether the new inhabitants bought the land with proper value is one question, the way Crèvecoeur presents the concern of property rights amidst the dwindling Native population and their impoverishment as working in an impeccably perfect manner demonstrates his interest in establishing the Nantucket community as an exemplary coherent political system.

He is awed by the example of commerce and social progress on the island, and thinks about the universal applicability of capitalism as a system. He presents the settlement as a prototype of progress that should be a model for future, “What has happened here, has and will happen everywhere else. Give mankind the full rewards of their industry. . . ; the first will fertilize the very sand on which they tread, the other exhibit a navigable river, spreading plenty and cheerfulness wherever the declivity of the ground leads it. (59) Despite the absence of the word ‘capitalism— though he explains “capital” (77)—in *Letters*, Crèvecoeur argues that men are naturally industrious and innovative when assured with full rewards of their efforts; while it would be interesting to see how he would view the progressive tax popular in the modern world, he is of the opinion that heavy taxes and governmental regulations tramples hard work.

To test the political nature of Nantucket ethnography, one can place passages from *Letters* seamlessly in any book that celebrates the power of capitalism. One such book is Joyce Appleby’s *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* that chronicles the last three centuries of capitalism as unprecedented human progress. Appleby suggests that capitalism provides a natural impetus for capitalists and workers to work hard. When guaranteed with the full reward, entrepreneurs invest in the technology, producing goods at a cheaper price, inventing new products and bringing about changes in tastes and lifestyles. Many passages from Crèvecoeur’s text can be just inserted into her book. For instance, the following sentence could be placed almost anywhere without modifying her argument: “After many trials and several miscarriages, they succeeded; thus they produced, step by step; the profits of one successful enterprise helped them to purchase and prepare better materials for a more extensive one” (75-76). Emphasizing how the system works, Appleby thinks that common people at the same time work hard because they want to purchase new products marketed by companies. She writes, “after all, desire had proved a mighty stimulus to steady work habits when people were left free to choose from the cornucopia available to them” (133). So, what Appleby finds in hindsight as history, Crèvecoeur sees it before him.

Now, questions may arise in this way: Is the Nantucket sequence a manifesto for the neoliberal version of capitalism? Does Crèvecoeur celebrate free-market economy by placing everything on economic freedom? One major difference exists between Appleby’s history of capitalism and the Crèvecoeur’s version: for Appleby, human desire for accumulation drives the relentless revolution of capitalism; Crèvecoeur does not center his theory on the kind of individualistic competition implied in such desire. Time and again, Crèvecoeur reinforces the islanders’ sense of community, simplicity, and temperance. Wealthy residents on the island, for instance, do not wish to migrate to off-shore productive lands a few hundred miles away. They do not think to “live sumptuously” or show “ostentatious generosity.” He continues, “These are thoughts that have never entered into their heads; they would be filled with horror at the thought of forming wishes and plans so different from their simplicity, which is their general standard in affluence as well as in poverty” (91).

From that perspective, Crèvecoeur’s Nantucket section can be a demonstration of Marx Weber’s thesis that capitalism originated from the spirit of puritanism. From that perspective, this kind of ethical characterization of a model capitalist community is largely the function of

Crèvecoeur's contemporary intellectual discourse. As scholars have established, republicanism served as the dominant political ideology during the Revolutionary period in America. While capitalism may be the mantra of American politics later, eighteenth-century republicanism predominantly was an anti-democratic, anti-mercantilist, anti-feudal rule of propertied gentlemen who served their community and nation for the sake of their virtue. From this vantage point, capitalism and revolutionary-period republicanism appear antagonistic. Since republicanism's roots lay in stoic traditions, the self-interest embedded in mercantile practices did not fit within republican discourse. But, as Mark Longaker has argued, the potency of republican discourse in eighteenth-century America emanated more from providing a forum of common vocabulary for various interests rather than from serving a single coherent political philosophy. Developed within that discursive scenario, Crèvecoeur's capitalism does not thus fully align with the unrestrained free-market economy: while the Nantucket ethnography values the role of limited government, it eschews the sense of cut-throat competition and undervalues profit as the driving factor of human endeavor.

The Rhetoric of Jefferson

Besides their common interests in politics, Crèvecoeur and Jefferson also are engaged with the question of the biological degeneration of the European race in America. Crèvecoeur dedicates his book to Abbè Raynal, the French naturalist philosopher who extended Comte de Buffon's theory that natural condition determines human mental condition. Since Europeans have immigrated to Americas and had a sense of cultural superiority, the theory posed a challenge. While the new world would offer bountiful resources, would it contribute to new settlers' progress remained a significant question to which Jefferson turns his attention in *Notes* (Chiles 111-21). Ethnographic mode would be particularly important in light of this question; if they could furnish an example of enlightened human presence in the new world, they could be assured of successful European future in Americas. In Nantucket chapters, Crèvecoeur answers firmly: human achievement is a matter of political conditions, not of natural resources.

On the other hand, Jefferson looks for signs of Native American civilization. Jefferson's appreciation of the oratory of Logan, a Native American man, and the general Native American gentleness and hospitality come forward in this connection (Wallace 108-30). In Logan, he finds an untrained Native orator who could speak in par with Cicero. This eloquence reassures him about the promise of the new land: Native Americans may not have other things worthy of demonstration from European standard, but the sheer presence of an eloquent Native man with the capacity for equanimity and rational deliberation even at the worst of his circumstances ensures the soil's capacity to sustain the European vision of civilization. From Jefferson's perspective, Logan embodies the antithesis of any fear of degeneration because his eloquence offers Jefferson an assurance that Europeans too could make progress in the new world. Or, stating the same idea differently, the new world geography does not portend any degenerative warning for European settlers.

While Jefferson does not find anything else of high significance besides Logan's speech, his European angle is evident from his description. First, he approaches his ethnography using a comparative model: he compares and contrasts American floras, faunas, and people with those of Europe. Second, he approaches his material using a (quasi)scientific methodology, so that his inferences would be valid. For instance, in Query 11, the researcher Jefferson collects information from many expedition reports about the number of Native American tribes, their populations, and locations in tables and describes them in a fact-based style. Such an approach works perfectly for persuasion because his ethnography appears standing for itself instead of being an allegory of something else.

Maybe cathedrals stood as great marks of European ingenuity in his mind, Jefferson searches for Native American monuments, only to state that he “know[s] of no such thing existing as an Indian monument” (223). What he finds instead is a native barrow with a large number of skeletons in it. While the description of the barrow in itself tells nothing of Native Americans, his scientific method and the subsequent ethnography’s positivist methodology are on full display in this kind of pre-proto-ethnographic approach: “It was situated on the low grounds of the Rivenna, about two miles above its principal fork, and opposite to some hills, on which had been an Indian town. . . . The following are the particular circumstances which gave it this aspect” (225). What is evident here is the objectivist method of approaching a culture. While it may not speak much about Native Americans themselves, the method is valuable because it embodies the ideology of disinterested, scientific observation.

Though Jefferson knows that much of his interpretation depends on “conjecture” (220) as “very little can now be discovered of the subsequent history of these tribes” (222), he raises another “great question”: the origin of the aboriginal inhabitants of America (226). Again, in a scientific vein, he answers: “the resemblances between the Indians of America and the eastern Inhabitants of Asia, would induce us to conjecture, that the former are the descendants of the latter, or the latter of the former” (226). Besides pondering on the conundrum of the origin, he also looks for evidence of literature—the hallmark of a great civilization. He does not find any “records of literature” among Native Americans (227). Besides monuments and literature, the state of government among Native Americans is another aspect that interests Jefferson. He notices the scattered locations of tribes and radical language differences among them, arguing that the conditions are the “results from the circumstances of their never having submitted themselves to any laws, any coercive power, and shadow of government” (220).

But this absence of government does not lead to the affirmation of the degeneration thesis. It rather provides the hope in the sense that supplying such government would generate the ‘civilization.’ The hope is enhanced further by the fact that the aboriginal inhabitants have “their manners, and . . . moral sense of right and wrong, which like the sense of tasting and feeling, in every man makes part of his nature,” the fundamental blueprint to work on (220). He also finds other encouraging signs: “Imperfect as this species of coercion may seem, crimes are very rare among them” (220). Crime, as a loaded concept originated in European legal context, might not have corresponding equivalent practices in eighteenth-century Native American concepts, but the comparison provides him an opportunity to make a grand observation about the impact of law and government on human nature: “Insomuch that were it made a question, whether no law, as among the savage Americans, or too much law, as among the civilized Europeans, submit man to the great evil, one who has seen both conditions of existence would pronounce it to be the last: and that the sheep are happier of themselves, than under care of the wolves” (220). Here is the Enlightenment moment: Jefferson, who would later advise the Cherokees to adopt a written code, states that “great societies cannot exist without government: The Savages therefore break them into small ones” (Jefferson 220; for Native American connection, see Conley 84-85).

What is interesting is that besides Logan’s oratory and Logan’s heart-wrenching story of his family’s murder, Jefferson does not include any inner Native American stories. Preoccupied with documenting facts, Jeffersonian ethnography is an abstracted documentation without the rhythm and structure of culture under his investigation, and thus it does not capture the life of the Native cultural mind. Instead of having what Geertz calls “thick description,” *Notes* offers a data-crunching methodology without much substance about Native Americans themselves. But despite this limitation, Jefferson’s Native American ethnography is valuable because it offers a window to his mind and to the questions troubling his generation and to the methods the generation used to answer them.

The Rhetoric of Tyler

Published while Jefferson was engaged in a debate about the state of federalism, Royall Tyler's *Algerine Captive* is a fictional account that tries to pass as a historical and ethnographic narration. Presented in the first-person narrative, his portrayal of the Islamic faith and North African settlement demonstrates that he researched his subject matter seriously for the book (Baeppler 230). The novel was written in the context when about seven hundred Americans were captured and enslaved by North African Muslim pirates, making the event a national sensation, which must have inspired Tyler to use the topic for his political purpose, particularly to make a case for a stronger federal government in the United States.

By 1790s, the United States had already established a strong federal government with the 1789 Constitution, but the debates on the new political structure continued for long. American colonies during the Revolution were united by their collective antipathy to the British Empire, but the post-independence context did not easily lend for a big national government, largely because the dominant republican discourse of the time dissented against the centralization of power, a major reason for the absence of functional federal government in the Articles of Confederation of 1781, the main governing document between the 1776 independence and the enforcement of the new constitution in 1789. Reading *The Algerine Captive* with this context in mind, it is obvious that Tyler as a Northerner Federalist realized the need for an imaginative leap and pragmatic justification for the existence of the new federal state. It is for this purpose that he uses his ethnographic description of the Muslim others in his book. He presents an American citizen's vulnerability in the international system, the despotic traditionalism of Algiers and the ideal of freedom as reasons for the significance of the new federal state (For contrarian view, White 6).

Since 11 September 2001, Tyler's book has attracted the attention of many critics (see Pangborn; Sayre; Holt). While these new readings explore political, philosophical and genre concerns of the novel, the book's ethnographic aspect waits to be foregrounded, particularly because the book represents one of the earliest instances of how the selfhood of the United States structurally depends on its conception of ethnic other—something that can be seen in its shifting ethos from melting pot to multiculturalism to the current debates on immigration and the war on terrorism. Such an angle would also make us cautious to take the celebratory account of ethnic other—the North African Muslim culture in this case—with extra care. For instance, as Kari Holt highlights, the narrator in *Algerine Captive* advocates the similarity between Christian and Islamic theologies (482). Despite his suffering as a slave, the narrator is careful to represent the Islamic faith in the best light possible. But, in the end, after his return from North Africa, the narrator's tone repudiates that kind of nuanced understanding as his call for a stronger federal government starts becoming prominent. Why is this kind of wavering in the tone? The part of the answer is that the context of the 1790s required this kind of complex framing: the dramatization of competing religions exemplified how the colonies could co-exist in the union without compromising their sovereignty; only the international chaos represented by the horror of white captivity and slavery in the lawless world and the primitivism of Islamic condition described in the book would justify the need of a strong federal government.

In this 'first' American novel that asks to be treated as a 'factual' endeavor, the writer reads Koran and summarizes its main tenets (Tyler 7). The Christian narrator engages with an Algerian Mullah in a healthy exchange. Enacted amidst the rugged natural context and the despotic and primitive North African manners, their dialogue concludes with an agreement that the differences between the religions are not as distinct as normally anticipated. When it is viewed from the perspective of internal political debate during Tyler's time, this episode functions as an analogy to American domestic political context. The book's argument becomes this: if the narrator Underhill can engage with Islam, perhaps the most heretic of the American national imagination, why cannot the colonies see themselves in the United States of America? As rational and educated

persons, the Americans living in any colony can read even the most peculiar aspect of anybody else and can engage with their perspective without having to convert to something heretical. If Underhill can understand the Islamic faith without losing his religion, the states should not worry about their collaboration through the national government. The book's argument continues: the engagement with the other does not obliterate one's identity and particularity, rather it makes one stronger and more distinguished. If Underhill's encounter with a despotic North African ruler can enlarge his humanity, a state's participation in the national government with other states enhances its political influence. This argument shows that the Algerine narrative is a calculated ethnographic-literary move designed to forward the federalist position.

But as stated above, this nuanced ideological compromise does not stretch up to the last part of the book. The tone shifts as Tyler's realist position starts taking over his idealist vision. Once the narrator is back in the United States after his six years of slavery in Algiers, Underhill is more concerned with what he has lost than what he achieved from his fate in North Africa. Now, the narrative focus is more on the military and economic strength rather than on the subtle ideas suggested in the Mullah-Underhill dialogue. Underhill makes the following grand statement:

My ardent wish is, that my fellow citizens profit by my misfortunes. If they peruse these pages with attention they will perceive the necessity of uniting our federal strength to enforce the due respect among other nations. Let no foreign emissaries inflame us against one nation, by raking into the ashes of long extinguished enmity or delude us into the extravagant schemes of another, by recurring to fancied gratitude. Our first object is union among ourselves. For to no nation besides the United States can the antient saying be more emphatically applied; by UNITING WE STAND, BY DIVING WE FALL. (225-226)

So, the book thus asserts that federalism is not impossible ideologically because the particularities of the states are not themselves the justification for the anti-federalist position. But the book goes further and shows how the national government was not only about ideology; the fact that the international order is unruly and dangerous also warrants the need for a strong federal government. Both ways, states would consolidate their strength. Underhill thus asks for the shift of imagination on the part of states demonstrating both soft ideological and hard military and economic conditions. This whole rendering—particularly the final passage quoted above—suggests how Tyler frames the narrative, including North African ethnography and theological discussions in the book, structurally to support his political position. His treatment of Islam is complex as he does not fully denounce the Muslim despot as an ethnic other, which as suggested has its own strategic political reason in the context of relationships among the states and slavery. But, despite this, this text also takes part in the context of the early national period when “the recurrent cultural images of Islam” particularly of oriental despots stood “in opposition to many qualities that citizens of the United States affirmed in their own bid for moral legitimacy as an emerging civilization” (Marr 10).

Slavery disturbed this moral claim for the perfection of the union in the 1790s. The southern landed gentry was not ready to abolish the slavery because it worked as its major economic staple. While the north-south ideological division may not always work seamlessly, Tyler represents the dominant northern conscience that saw slavery as a moral obstacle to the perfection of the union. It is this conscience that also pushes him both to render a moving description of the middle passage and to write a book on captivity and slavery. “After all, as a New England Federalist who believed in the natural alliance of commercial prosperity and social progress, Tyler could not imagine that even the most hapless son of New Hampshire would be shown up by slaveholders” (Crain xxvii). By putting a white educated male through the ordeals of slavery, Tyler shows the inhumane face blotting American democracy. His argument in the book becomes a question: if Algerine slavery is milder in comparison to the American practice, how can the new Nation make its claim to modernity and freedom? Juxtaposing the two instances of slavery

—Underhill’s misfortunes as a slave in the hand of a pre-modern feudal despot and African-Americans enslavement in America—within a single narrative, Tyler issues a moral pressure to the American establishment. Added in this process in the book is the moving description of the inhumane and torturous treatment of slaves on the ships carrying bonded people from Africa to Americas. By showing what goes behind slavery—the forced uprooting of a person from his homeland, the horror on slave ships, the emotional derangement of the captivated people—he asks his readers to think about the main threat against the union, the threat that would cause a rift in the Union in the mid-nineteenth-century Civil War, six decades after he wrote the book. But, as the narrative progresses, the abolitionist Underhill becomes weaker than the federalist Underhill. As Crain has noted, in the middle part of the book, “slavery goes from being an instance of Southern fatuousness to a moral catastrophe, and the reader cannot help but notice that Underhill’s alteration of attitude tracks his self-interest rather closely” (xxxvii). But as soon as he is free from slavery and is back in the United States, the narrator’s idealistic political aspirations are put to rest in order to establish him back to the realistic condition. Before making the impassioned final statement for the federal state, Underhill writes about his personal future in this way:

I now mean to unite myself to some amiable woman, to pursue my practice, as a physician; which I hope, will be attended with more success than when essayed with the inexperience and giddiness of youth. To contribute cheerfully to the support of our excellent government, which I have learnt to adore, in school of despotism; and thus secure to myself the enviable character of a useful physician, a good father and worthy Federal citizen. (225)

Pragmatism overtakes idealism here. Now saving the federal state—even with all its blemishes like slavery—becomes more important. The words “experience,” “useful” and “secure myself” and his desire to establish himself as a middle-class family man overrides his earlier anti-slavery sentiments that are characterized now as the political reveries of “inexperience and giddiness of youth.” Underhill sacrifices his abolitionist’s aspirations for the sake of the union.

Conclusion

This study of a few selected chapters on the customs and manners suggests that early American ethnography offers a distinct opportunity to understand the political and philosophical questions of the time. These texts instantiate three different political manifestos, using three different cultural accounts: Crèvecoeur’s Nantucket sequence is a political-economic treatise advocating for the efficacy of capitalism, not a part of a fictional account; *Notes* is more a representative of Jefferson’s scientific methodology rather than the accurate description of Native Americans; and Tyler’s book represents one of the earliest appropriations of Muslim other in the national imagination of the United States. In these earliest texts, the ethnographic method functions rhetorically to concretize and dramatize abstract political concepts. This study thus demands a fresh excavation of other manners and customs chapters from the early American period so that a bigger ideological picture of the time could be foregrounded.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers of SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts and Humanities for their thoughtful comments. Thanks also to Prof. Timothy Sweet of West Virginia University who first read the draft and provided substantive guidance. The author is also grateful to Dr. Sandra Gustafson, who was editor of Early American Literature in 2017, and to the anonymous reviewer to whom Dr. Gustafson sent the manuscript. She asked the author to “revise and resubmit” with revision suggestions. While the paper was not resubmitted in 2017 because of the author’s other projects, many of those suggestions have been incorporated in this new draft.

Works Cited

- Appleby, Joyce. *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2010.
- Baepler, Paul Michel. "The Barbary Captivity Narrative in American Culture." *Early American Literature*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2004, pp. 217-246.
- Bailyn, Bernard. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Belknap Press, 1992.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*, Translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977.
- Bauer, Ralph. *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literature: Empire, Travel, Modernity*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Chiles, Katy L. *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literatures of Early America*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Allegory." *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford & George E. Marcus, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 98-121.
- Conley, Robert J. *The Cherokee Nation: A History*. University of New Mexico Press, 2005.
- Crevecoeur, J. Hector St. John de. *Letters from an American Farmer*. Dover Publications, Inc., 2005.
- Crain, Caleb. "Introduction." *The Algerine Captive*. The Modern Library, 2002, pp. xvii-xxxiii.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Anthropology with an Attitude*. Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" *Language, Countermemory, Practices: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Bouchand, Donald F., Translated by Donald F. Bouchand and Sherry Simon. Cornell UP, 1977, pp. 113-38.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.
- Holt, Keri. "'All Parts of the Union I considered My Home': Federal Imagination of *The Algerine Captive*." *Early American Literature*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2011, pp. 481-515.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Electronic Text Center: University of Virginia Library, 1782 (electronically published in 2011).
- Jennifer Schell, "Figurative Surveying: National Space and the Nantucket Chapters of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's "Letters from an American Farmer." *Early American Literature*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2008, pp. 581-604.
- Levi-Strauss. *Structural Anthropology*. Basic Books, 1974.
- Longaker, Mark. *Rhetoric and Republic: Politics, Civic Discourse, and Education in Early America*. University of Alabama Press, 2007.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. George Routledge and Sons, 1992.
- Marr, Timothy. *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Myers, James P. "Crèvecoeur: Concealing and Revealing the Secret Life." *Early American Literature*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2014, pp. 357-401.
- Pangborn, Matthew. "Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, America, and the Blind Man of Philosophy." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory*, vol. 6, no. 3, 201, pp. 1-27.
- Philbrick, Nathaniel. "The Nantucket Sequence in Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1991, pp. 414-432.
- Philbrick, Thomas. *St. John de Crevecoeur*. Twayne, 1970.
- Rice, Grantland S. "Crevecoeur and the Politics of Authorship in Republican America." *Early American Literature*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1993, pp. 91-119.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1979.
- Sayre, Gordon M. "Renegades from Barbary: The Transnational Turn in Captivity Studies." *American Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2012, pp. 347-359.

- Shalhope, Robert E. "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1972, pp. 49-80.
- Thomas, Keith Stewart. "Jefferson, Buffon and the Moose." *American Scientist*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2008, pp. 200-202.
- Tyler, Royall. *The Algerine Captive: Or, The Life and Adventure of Doctor Updike Underhill*. The Modern Library, 2002.
- Wallace, Anthony. *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans*. Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Warner, Michael. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. Routledge, 2001.
- White, Ed. "Crèvecoeur in Wyoming." *Early American Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2008, pp. 379-407.
- . "Divided We Stand: Emergent Conservatism in Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, pp. 5-27.
- Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Woolf, Greg. *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

To cite this article [MLA style]:

Aryal, Bhushan. "The Rhetoric of Early American Ethnography: Framing Politics in the Texts by Crèvecoeur, Jefferson and Tyler." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, August 2022, pp. 102-113. *NepJOL*, doi:10.3126/sjah.v4i2.47426.