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American Enlightenment: The New World and Modern Western Thought

Jennifer Greeson*

“In the beginning all the world was *America*,” writes John Locke (301) in one of the more gnomic lines of the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). We might continue his allusion to the first lines of the Bible: “And the world was without form, and void. . . . And Europe said, let there be light: and there was light.” The facetious extension of Locke’s formulation yields a fairly accurate account of what, until recently, has been the conventional way of conceptualizing the relationship between the Enlightenment and America. First, the New Thought emerges like a lightning strike in Europe; it is a geographically self-contained phenomenon, an autonomous decision on the part of British and Continental thinkers to emerge from man’s “self-incurred immaturity,” as Kant would put it retrospectively in 1784 (54). Then, America becomes for the first time something other than void; it becomes a crucial laboratory for Enlightenment thought. America is now a site for discovering first principles, a ground for expanding European taxonomies into universal ones; and, finally, it is the place where the new political and social theories are put into praxis as new nations emerge. As Henry Steele Commager put it succinctly a generation ago, “Europe imagined, and America realized the Enlightenment.”¹

This book stands that relationship of priority on its head. Instead, I argue that the European conquest of the American hemisphere and development of the Atlantic slave system provided the necessary *preconditions* for the subsequent intellectual innovations of the Enlightenment era—and that writings out of America provided the pretexts for modern Western philosophy. “The only wonder is that the beginning of the [New Thought] . . . could have

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entered anyone's mind," writes Francis Bacon in the opening pages of his *New Organon* (1620), throwing down a gauntlet to the intellectual historians of the future. But if the spur to Bacon's creation of a new method for knowledge production was not apparent to him at the time, it might seem fairly obvious to a twenty-first-century reader: across his title page is splashed the famous engraving of a ship passing through the Pillars of Hercules—the classical boundaries of the known world—and sailing into the open Atlantic Ocean. The illustration is not, as is usually assumed, simply a metaphor. "Many pass through and knowledge is the greater," reads a rough translation of Bacon's Latin caption on the frontispiece; it is the change in what is known—Europe's discovery of the New World—that requires a revolution in European ways of knowing. Thus Enlightenment thought is not geographically autonomous, but reactive to the global material conditions that surround its production; the New Thought appears as a post hoc creation of theory to explain, critique, and justify the imperial practices coming into being, rapidly and rapaciously, in the Atlantic world. By 1762, surveying the thought of the previous century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was already proposing just this: that the purpose of the culture of a society is to legitimate the power structure of its state—to transform "force into right, and obedience into duty" (43).

To apprehend the Enlightenment as fundamentally American—as produced by Europe's encounter with an unexpectedly west-er West—is to engage in broad and enduring debates across the fields of early American studies, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European literary and intellectual history, and political theory.² In early American studies, major works (by Joyce Appleby, Bernard Bailyn, J. G. A. Pocock, Gordon S. Wood, and others), at least since the 1976 Bicentennial, have looked to Enlightenment thought for "the ideological origins of the American Revolution,"³ instantiating the historical model of interpretation in which Europe provides the theory of Western modernity and America acts upon it. More recently, early Americanists (Robert A. Ferguson, Andrew Lewis, Sarah Rivett, and others) have sought to recast American colonial subjects as not only recipients of Enlightenment thought, but also—by acting as agents of direct observation—participants in its production. These recent studies find that, as Susan Scott Parrish aptly puts it, "Empiricism . . . gave authority [to colonial subjects] where political empire took it away" (22).

"American Enlightenment: The New World and Modern Western Thought" participates in this work of uncovering an Enlightenment grounded in circum-Atlantic dialogue, but it moves

beyond the purview of early American studies to address the central, high-stakes questions that magnetize much of the recent writing on Enlightenment thought by political theorists and literary and intellectual historians of Europe. How is it that during the era that gives rise to the cherished modern Western values—equal human dignity, freedom, the rule of law, and representative, accountable government—Europeans simultaneously carry out the most massive crimes against humanity that had been essayed in recorded history? Why is the category of the universal, from its inception, haunted by the specter of the exception, the exclusion? Questions such as these have been conceived as the central paradoxes or “problems” of the Enlightenment era, in major works as early as David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) and its sequel. More recent books in political theory, such as those by Uday Mehta, Sankar Muthu, and Jennifer Pitts, have investigated the extent to which Enlightenment thought provided a critique of the hierarchical and exploitative projects of empire, even as it ultimately supported the imperial order. At the same time, compelling recent works in British eighteenth-century studies (by Lynn Festa, Simon Gikandi, and others) have traced the inextricability of the “culture of taste” from the culture of the Atlantic slave system. In suggesting not just the proximity of Enlightenment thought to the practices of New World empire, but the *origin* of that thought as a *response* to those practices, “American Enlightenment” particularly follows the example of studies—such as Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1976), Sibylle Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004), and Susan Buck-Morss’s *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009)—that have insisted upon the inextricability of the intellectual and material worlds of the Enlightenment era. To put the matter squarely, we can’t have the liberatory theory without the exploitative reality.

“American Enlightenment” takes up a multifaceted problem of intellectual history, and pursues readings in political theory, though I come to the task with the tools of a contemporary literary critic. The book is designed as a streamlined, suggestive series of case studies that pair foundational texts of Enlightenment philosophy with roughly contemporaneous foundational texts of Anglo-American colonization. These case studies are arranged chronologically, spanning from the turn of the seventeenth century to the turn of the nineteenth. The first half of the book is concerned with English texts exclusively, putting writings from Virginia, New England, and Carolina directly into conversation with Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke. The later case studies expand

their scope on the European side of the comparison, considering works of continental philosophy as well; on the American side, I try to keep “American” from collapsing entirely into “United States” after 1776, by keeping non-US Anglo-American texts in the mix.

My subject of investigation in each chapter is not Enlightenment theory itself so much as how it can be conceived and articulated at its emergence: what sorts of figures and language authors employ to craft their New Thought. This methodology positions the book at an intersection between literary history—the history of modes of expression—and the history of ideas. “American Enlightenment” is, thus, also intended as a showcase of what philological interpretation—seen by general readers in the past several decades as increasingly arcane and irrelevant—still has to offer to the broadest reaches of humanistic inquiry. It is this methodological approach, above all, that ties my new project to my first book, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (2010). (Of course, there are topical connections as well, since the eighteenth-century section of the first book took me deeply into the literature of natural history, Anglo-American empire, and Republican thought.) Since *Our South* was a study of US literary nationalism, I wanted to begin at the beginning—at the moment of US national independence. But every political, intellectual, and cultural history of the early US insisted that my topic—a cohesive, monolithic “South” contained within yet differentiated from the national whole—simply did not exist before the rise of North–South sectionalism in the decades preceding the Civil War. When I read the imaginative literature of the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s, though, just this sort of subnational South was everywhere! These literary invocations of “the South” were often fleeting and fragmentary—one stop in a peripatetic picaresque plot, for instance, or the shadowy site of origin or disappearance for a troublesome character. Reading across the literature of the era, though, I could demonstrate the pervasiveness and consistency of the South in the imaginative worlds of early US readers and writers—I could track its qualities and functions in the plots and symbology of the early Republic—and I could trace a genealogy of the geographical figure back to European imperial conventions for writing about tropical America.

This experience of uncovering a history that historians had been unable to find, precisely by using often-dismissed tools of philological analysis, has been transformative for my own perception of scholarship in literary studies. As I summarized my findings in the introduction to my first book: “Watching our South emerge in national literature decades before the rise of North/

South political sectionalism should, to my mind, constitute a brief for the real-world importance of literary history. The case of our South suggests a great deal about how imaginative literature can set the horizons of possibility for a culture, and how it constructs frameworks of expectation through which national life is perceived and interpreted” (11–12).

When things change—political organization, geographical knowledge, social orders—what are the resources available to people to assimilate, express, and intervene in that change? What words, what figures, what metaphors can be carried across the divide from the old world to the new—and how are those words and figures themselves changed in the process? A philological approach, trained on the sorts of essential questions we have learned to ask through the “historical turn” in literary studies of the past decades, seems to me to hold out the best promise of answering them.

Thus “American Enlightenment” has no pretensions to putting forth a continuous or exhaustive history. Instead, the book offers a series of readings intensely involved in the linguistic world of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writing it treats. These readings in the first three chapters uncover antecedents for the epochal theoretical works of Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke in Anglo-American imperial texts that significantly predated those works. The subsequent movement suggests that, precisely because of this priority of New World imperial texts in the initial phase of Enlightenment, American texts became a privileged site for the first critical engagements with modern Western thought, even as it unfolded.

I begin with a succinct introduction. “A Geographic Dialectic of Enlightenment” opens the book closer to our own time, with the mid-twentieth-century reconsiderations of Enlightenment thought and its uses that were spurred by the rise of totalitarianism and the Holocaust in Europe. This is the Enlightenment we have inherited—a totalizing ideological system that must be viewed with suspicion, as working in service of quite specific material programs—a revisionary view pioneered in texts such as Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), and Michel Foucault’s *Les Mots et les Choses* (translated as *The Order of Things* [1966]). I use the conditions of production of these key critiques of Enlightenment to set up the problematic of my book, for each critique was authored by a European intellectual provoked by direct contact with American culture: Adorno and Horkheimer, expatriated in Hollywood during the war, included screeds against jazz and the culture industry alongside their interrogation of

Enlightenment texts; Arendt, as a naturalized US citizen, turned again and again to the precedent of the American Revolution as a counter to European thought; and Foucault claimed to have realized the contingency of eighteenth-century systems of classification because he encountered an absurdist catalogue in a Jorge Luis Borges short story. “American Enlightenment” will investigate why American cultures provided these post-1945 European thinkers with the wedge that allowed them, as they perceived it, to get outside of the all-encompassing system of thought they sought to dismantle.

Chapter 1, “Faulty Instruments: New World, New Thought,” begins with Francis Bacon’s famous pronouncement that “*knowledge and power . . . are really come to the same thing*” (24), and argues that this pronouncement was generated in Bacon’s thought by the specter of Europe being *disempowered* due to faulty knowledge—ignorance of the actual dimensions of the world. Reading the prefatory sections of the *New Organon* reveals that Bacon was moved to create a new epistemology for Western thought in order to strike at “the root of errors” (51) in classical scholasticism: specifically, the error that had led to maps of just half of the world that purported to show the whole. By promoting a new system of knowledge production grounded in direct observation, collection, experimentation, and reproducible results, Bacon held out the possibility that a true (rather than self-deceiving) universal knowledge could be attained in the West through a continual expansion of systematic observation. The chapter then shifts to what seems an early example of the empirical method Bacon supposedly coined: Thomas Harriot’s *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), for several decades at the turn of the century the most important English-language publication about the New World—and one which predated Bacon’s work, and the founding of the Royal Society, by more than a generation. Commissioned by Sir Walter Raleigh to act in the unprecedented role (for an Anglo-American expedition) of scholar for the first English colony in the New World, the young Oxford tutor Harriot structured his *Briefe and True Report* as a work of observation, collection, and taxonomy (*avant la lettre*), presenting knowledge of the New World not as a surplus to imperial domination, but rather as intrinsic to it. The last section of the *Report*, Harriot’s remarkably modern, almost proto-anthropological account of the Algonquian people of Roanoke, in particular helps us to see why Bacon was so sure by 1620 that knowledge and power were synonyms. Harriot presents the material bases, social organization, and belief systems of Algonquian life with a clear eye to the instrumentality of the information. To know the people of the New World, he insists, is

to know how they may be manipulated, dominated, and, if necessary, eliminated.

Chapter 2, “Theocracy and the Problem of the Sovereign,” turns to questions of political theory and social organization as configured in two mid-seventeenth-century texts: John Winthrop’s founding statement of New England covenant theology, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) and Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651). Reading Winthrop’s speech as a work of political theory—he was trained as a lawyer, not a theologian—reveals that he is interested in the same issues of “first principle” that preoccupied Hobbes in the first part of his treatise: the matter of human nature, the origin of the state, the legitimation of authority. The novel situation of constituting a new colonial state allows Winthrop to prefigure some of the understandings Hobbes would formulate in the abstract a generation later: he posits the colony as made up of atomized individuals (with an individuality that “was at the same time a denial of individuality,” as C. B. MacPherson puts it [262]), who necessarily tend toward depravity (Hobbes’s “perpetual and restless desire of power after power” [47]), and thus must be bound together by a contract. Winthrop was perhaps able to make these conceptual advances so early because he was constituting the American colony as a *theocracy*; it is God himself who will enforce the social contract of Massachusetts Bay Colony. When Hobbes attempts to bring the same basic model into a secular realm, he ends up with the problem of the sovereign at the heart of *Leviathan*, the need to institutionalize and legitimate an absolute power in order to enforce the social contract. Starting from Winthrop thus suggests a new angle on Hobbes’s writing as a theorist of power during the Puritan overthrow of the British monarchy, providing another view of the interpenetration of the sacred and the secular in early Enlightenment thought (a matter to which chapter 4 returns).

Chapter 3, “A Prehistory of Possessive Individualism,” examines Locke’s creation of “property” and “the person” as symbiotic terms—his definition of self-proprietorship as the baseline of the human. Rather common-sensically, I argue that in order for Locke to conceive of the human as defined by possession of the self, he had first to understand selves as something to be possessed; in other words, that the commoditization of human beings in the Atlantic slave trade provided the necessary precondition for Locke’s formulation of the liberal individual. As in the preceding chapters, I read a document of Anglo-American empire against a work of Enlightenment theory, and again the imperial text precedes the theoretical one in date of composition, but in this chapter, both are authored by Locke himself: *Fundamental*

Constitutions of Carolina (1669) and *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). When intellectual historians pay attention to the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* at all, they tend to view the document as an awkward amalgam of feudal ideas about social order with harbingers of the rational new political theory Locke would develop later. This chapter instead reads the project of the imperial document—exporting the “natural” forms of life in England to America—as revelatory, exposing the bureaucracy, rationalization, and enforcement required to impose and maintain the natural order. We may then return to the *Two Treatises of Government* with fresh eyes and see Locke’s incessant turns to America and modern chattel slavery, particularly in the key early chapters of the second part as part of the fundamental structure of his thought on property and personhood, not as mere metaphors.

Chapter 4, “Proving God,” returns to the issue of the interpenetration of the sacred and the secular, by tracing an alternative to the Baconian drive for universal knowledge of nature developed in Puritan and particularly New England Puritan thought: the power of the category of the supernatural. Moving from the fourth part of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, “Of the Kingdome of Darknesse,” to Cotton Mather’s *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692), to Jonathan Edwards’s essay “Of Atoms” (1730s), the chapter traces Anglo-American thinkers attempting to configure the limits of knowledge. Hobbes theorizes that what cannot be known is harnessed in the service of power; Mather applies Baconian method to the unseen world and ends up only with “wonder,” which is what the Baconian method is designed to dispel; and both reach the conclusion that the unknowable is a key site of discourse, interpretation, persuasion—and, above all, of struggle for control. Finally, Edwards embraces the project of attempting to find the endpoint of knowledge, to reduce the natural world to the irreducible unit, in order to prove the unknowable being of God. The chapter ends by comparing Edwards’s “scientific” writings with his exact contemporary Giambattista Vico’s *The New Science* (1725). Unlike the other comparisons drawn in the book, these two thinkers’ works were almost certainly unknown to each other, but the many parallels (history as typology in Edwards, history as allegory in Vico; the shared interest in finding a baseline of divine providence in the material world) help to place Edwards in the larger Western philosophical moment, as the modern disciplines begin to emerge into the broad split addressed in the next two chapters.

Chapter 5, “Natural History,” moves forward into the mid eighteenth century, expands the purview of the book to touch on the French philosophers so important to American Revolution-era

thinkers, and introduces for the first time Anglo-American colonials who deliberately and publicly intervene in the intellectual debates of the metropolis. Focusing first on Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and the introduction to Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (translated as *Natural History* [1749]), the chapter opens by parsing the concept of "natural history," which, as Foucault has shown, exists not to tell a story about nature, but rather to make history natural: to posit extant human social orders as themselves part of the order of nature, able only to develop in one pre-ordained pattern. I depart from Foucault in insisting that this work is indispensable to imperial ideology, since it conveniently assigns to tropical climates the "natural" attributes of moral depravity, tyranny, and slavery; natural history was also, therefore, unavoidable for Anglo-American colonials writing in the era of the American Revolution. Turning next to passages from Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774) and Thomas Jefferson's "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" (1774) and *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), the chapter shows that Anglo-Americans worked with and against the methods of natural history, to liberatory and repressive ends. Claiming temperateness and natural fitness for English freedoms and self-government for Americans of English descent, both Long and Jefferson shift the French theories about the deterministic effect of climate on social order to frank assertions of racist hierarchy; they accept the hierarchy, but substitute race for place as its desideratum. Yet Long provides extensive accounts of slave revolts and *maronnage*, causing the imperial project to appear to be a site of continued struggle and resistance rather than a natural evolution of dominance, and Jefferson uses the natural history principle of self-evidence to argue that the subordinate position of Anglo-American colonials is unprecedented in English history, and that it thus must inevitably end.

Chapter 6, "Human Science," deals with the other side of the emerging disciplinary divide: the rise of the humanities as an extension of the larger Enlightenment epistemological project. Both David Hume (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748]) and Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1757]) seek to uncover the universal basis of how human knowledge is acquired, leading them into a human-based epistemology in which not abstract reason, but experience, matters. In both Hume's theories about "habit" or the "common sense," and Burke's theories about "taste" or "sensations," the basis of knowledge is the human entity—the body, the physical senses. Their work is thus shadowed by fears of what can be done to the body—Burke, in his central

assumption that terror arises from the instinct of self-preservation, is perhaps the great theorist of this point—and is especially shadowed by the condition of enslavement, which is by mid-century fixedly racialized. This dimension of these key texts, so influential in Anglo-American politics and aesthetics, comes into particular view when Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) is read as an engagement with them. Equiano insists upon the irremediable rupture between his "original free African state" (2: 21) and his "liberal sentiments" (1: iv) as "almost an Englishman" (1: 132), even down to maintaining double names on his title page; he structures his narrative around three key scenes of loss of consciousness, in which the project of a human-based epistemology is totally disrupted; and he makes the binaries of African/English, black/white, slave/free into a diagnosis of the condition of modern Western personhood, in which Enlightened individuals are at once "[their] own master[s], and completely free" (2: 17). His circum-Atlantic knowledge throws into relief the terror attendant upon the creation of a human-centered society, for the society then operates around fixing the limits and policing the borders of the category of the human itself.

Chapter 7, "The Fiction of the Liberal Individual," reads the opening chapters of Rousseau's most influential work of political theory, *The Social Contract* (1762) in conversation with Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1790). In order to "institute a people," Rousseau argues (69), a nation must lose "the person" in the "common self" or "general will" (50). The question of where the idiosyncratic person goes in this model, beyond being constituted as an interchangeable citizen-unit of the state, is one that is shifted into the realm of representation—much as the issue of "popular sovereignty" was dealt with through representative government in the constitution of the United States of America across the 1780s. Rousseau acknowledges the shift with his own composition of *The Confessions* (1782), which he began writing as he finished *The Social Contract*. Franklin's autobiography, though—most of it authored in the era of the US constitutional debates—deals explicitly with the issue of national formation that is foremost in Rousseau's work of theory but not in his autobiography. Using traditions of Puritan allegory and typology in concert with the plot structure of slave narrative, Franklin creates a national representative shaped by the history of American colonization whose idiosyncrasies are showcased to reinforce larger points about a "national character" that predates and spans the process of decolonization. As this list of literary terms suggests, the chapter proposes that the liberal individual of American

Enlightenment exists, by the end of the eighteenth century, predominantly in the realm of imaginative literature.

Chapter 8, “Born Free and Everywhere in Chains,” concludes “American Enlightenment” with two understudied American national texts: Venture Smith’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America* (1798), and the Second Constitution of Haiti (1805). In Smith’s autobiography of enslavement, self-redemption, and capital accumulation, personhood is mediated entirely through the market, carrying the concept of “possessive individualism” to a nightmarish but logical extreme. The Haitian Constitution, on the other hand, replaces the social-contract figures of a sovereign people and a body made up of interchangeable citizen-units with the figure of a national family; the substitution both insists upon relationships of obligation and interconnectedness and institutionalizes a hierarchy within the state that is antithetical to social contract thought. From something like opposite directions, both texts expand upon the paradox of modern Western life as Equiano gives it—that modern individuals are simultaneously “[their] own master[s] and completely free”—providing American interventions in describing Enlightened existence that could offer important equipment for living in our own time.

Notes

1. Henry Steele Commager’s *Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (1977).
2. This is to say that I am employing the modifier “American” in a new way in my title. The phrase “American Enlightenment” usually is invoked, in the manner of “Scottish Enlightenment,” to denote the reception of presumably pre-extant Enlightenment thought in American colonial institutions in the eighteenth century, and the subsequent response to, elaboration on, or collaboration in that system of knowledge production by people living in America.
3. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* is the title of Bailyn’s 1992 book.

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