Corruption of Morals

The Boston Massacre in the Social Imagination of Resistance and Revolution

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Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1676

Violence and death gripped the region as a conflict between Puritans and Algonquian Indians, later known as King Philip’s War, raged across the land. Neither side hesitated to commit atrocities. Puritans murdered hundreds of Indians in a single encampment; Indians buried Puritans alive as they begged for mercy. Puritan women and children ran screaming into the woods, their faces and bodies on fire, while Puritan men decapitated Algonquian Indians—Narragansetts, Nipmucks, Pocumtucks, Pequots, and Wampanoags—in countryside and swamp habitations. In the midst of this carnage, a Natick Indian awaited execution for high treason. A Protestant convert supposedly aiding Puritan “fathers” during the conflict, the “praying” Indian had in fact become a spy for the Algonquians. Death came swiftly for the Natick, easing the transition from life to spirit, from history to memory.¹

Boston, March 1775

A doctor entered an apothecary’s shop, his servant trailing close behind. Once inside, he lifted a white bundle from the attendant’s arms and walked to the back of the building. He then “robed himself” with the cloth. His expectant audience, staring from the doors of the Old South Church across the street, gaped as the doctor exited the establishment and strode towards them, a “Ciceronian Toga” draped around his body. The doctor entered the church and ascended the pulpit.²

Memory of the Boston Massacre unified these seemingly disparate acts, separated across time and geographic space in New England, by contributing to the perpetuation of a colonial American identity and the emergence of American nationalism. During the resistance movement that preceded the American Revolution, the white populace of New England embraced a memory of the Boston Massacre that accorded with popular conceptions of a white, masculine, and virtuous colonial American identity, first by supporting an image of Crispus Attucks as a white patriot, and then accepting his vilification as a half-black, half-Indian savage. As resistance developed into revolution and colonial identity developed into American nationalism, white men and women attending Boston Massacre commemorations confirmed, by crowd action in the public sphere, a masculine construction of national origins that excluded Attucks and conflated the New England past with the totality of British North American history, providing a foundation for a regional form of American nationalism in the early Republic.

Histories of the Boston Massacre have focused solely on the event instead of how it was remembered, thereby ignoring its central role in the creation of American nationalism in New England. The first book-length study, Frederic Kidder’s A History of the Boston Massacre (1870), contained both a narrative and collection of corresponding primary source documents. Kidder’s history, published

² New York Gazetteer, March 16, 1775.
in the centennial year of the Massacre, often paralleled the Boston radicals' version of events—a dubious source at best because their accounts sought to rally the public into the resistance movement. The second full-length study came in 1970 (the bicentennial of the event) with the publication of Hiller Zobel's *The Boston Massacre*. Zobel characterized the Massacre as a culmination of the resistance and violence that had plagued Boston since the Stamp Act Crisis. He closed the study by briefly surveying events immediately after the trial, arguing that the Boston Massacre as an event did not incite revolutionary sentiments across the colonies. The apparent thoroughness of Zobel's survey dissuaded subsequent historians from investigating the impact of the Boston Massacre as a remembered event in the public imagination. Recently, however, literary analyst Sandra Gustafson studied the recorded bodily actions and spoken metaphors used by radicals in the Boston Massacre trial and in other orations in a book on early American oratory. She contends that, at first, patriot orators legitimated their claims to power by engaging in rational discourse, believing that irrational discourse corrupted society. However, bodily movements and symbolism in oral performances, such as the Boston Massacre orations, gradually became more important than rational discourse.

Visual and written accounts of the Massacre remain unanalyzed, as do the contextual reasons for—and consequences of—Adams's characterization of Crispus Attucks during the Boston Massacre trial. Such a contextual treatment, especially in analyzing the effects of King Philip's War and Attucks' Afro-Indian heritage on public memory, forms the first section of this paper. A study of subsequent Boston Massacre commemorations, the orators' performance techniques and garb (such as a toga), their construction of an imaginary American past that excluded Attucks, and the concomitant audience reaction, comprises the second section of this essay. This analysis employs the early American public sphere to demonstrate the cultural negotiation between audiences attending the orations and radical orators who needed public affirmation to legitimate the imagined American nation and American nationalism. The final part investigates the influence of these printed and oratorical representations of the Boston Massacre on American nationalist rites in the early Republic. But first, by way of introduction, the initial section will begin not with the propaganda or trial, but with a summary of the Boston Massacre as an event according to eyewitness accounts and secondary sources.

I

The Boston Massacre resonated across New England because the skirmish came on the heels of a similar incident in London that confirmed colonial fears of ominous corruption within the British Empire. On 10 May 1767, thousands of

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6 Tracts by radical republican Britons John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon that pointed to this perceived corruption, collected largely in volumes entitled *Cato's Letters*, were widely read in the American colonies and contributed to colonial fears of imperial corruption. See Bernard Bailyn, *The
young men gathered outside of a London jail to protest the imprisonment of John Wilkes, a Whig dissenter and pamphleteer. British troops, unable to quell their own anger in the face of demonstrator ridicule, fired into the crowd. As a result, a young man named William Allen lay dead.\(^7\) In the days that followed, Whig opposition writers harangued the British ministers whom they believed to be responsible, dubbing the tragedy "The Massacre of St. George's Field."\(^8\) Reports of the "Massacre" and subsequent trial reached American newspapers, always full of political news from Europe, in a few months. The merchant politicians and pundits of Boston—Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Dr. Joseph Warren, among others—devoured any news on the tragic event.\(^9\) On 27 October 1768, the Boston Newsletter published the trial narrative by a "Ministerial Hireling" who noticed that "the curiosity" of the Boston public had "been very much excited by the trial." This "Hireling," lamented "the venality of the times," such a massacre—due to the corruption pervasive in English government—proved that "all public virtue [was] lost."\(^10\)

By March 1770, British troops had been stationed in Boston for two years and many New Englanders viewed their presence, along with the 1765 Stamp Act and the 1767 Townshend Acts, as evidence of the same corruption that had caused the Massacre of St. George's Field. This burgeoning animosity engendered conflicts between British troops and Bostonians that eventually culminated in the Boston Massacre. Hiller Zobel's narrative offers the most accurate account of these events. On March 2, a small fight broke out between British soldiers seeking jobs to supplement their meager pay, and rope-workers who kindly offered one of the troops monetary reward to "go and clean my shithouse."\(^11\) A similar skirmish between British troops and Boston laborers erupted the next day. Then, on the cold, snowy evening of March 5, 1770, fights broke out between British troops and Boston civilians in three parts of the city: Dock Square, Murray's Barracks, and King Street between the Town House and the Customs House. A church bell began to ring, a signal for fire in Boston for decades. People from all over the city stopped their tasks and armed themselves with clubs and sticks, chanting "Fire!" Strangely enough, no fire existed in Boston on that snowy night, suggesting some sort of signal.\(^12\)

As soon as the bells began ringing, a man named Samuel Johnson quickly finished his supper at Thomas Symmonds' victualing-house (a diner), seized a cordwood stick, and led a large group of sailors toward King Street. Meanwhile, crowds from the other two locales converged on King Street, pelting snowballs and

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\(^8\) Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 173.


\(^10\) *Boston Newsletter*, October 27, 1768.


\(^12\) No evidence exists explaining why the church bell rang and why different people from all over the city suddenly took to the streets chanting "Fire!" while armed with wooden clubs and sticks (wood does not put out fires very effectively).

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yelling curses such as, "Lobster son of a bitch!" aimed at the British 29th Regiment stationed in front of the Customs House. Thomas Preston, Captain of the Regiment, arrived on the scene and pleaded with the growing mob to disperse. The mob, still chanting "fire," replied by surrounding and pressing in on the troops. The soldiers held their bayonets fixed in front of them. Individual skirmishes began breaking out as any hope for reconciliation dissipated into the dark Boston evening. A club sailed through the air and hit Private Montgomery in the face. Blood ran down his face and into his eyes, spattering onto the fresh snow. He heaved himself back up and thrust a musket into the crowd blindly, firing a single shot.13

The shot missed, but the impetus to discharge spread like wildfire among the frightened troops. The blasts came almost in unison, mortally wounding Samuel Johnson as well as Samuel Gray, James Caldwell, Samuel Maverick, and Patrick Carr. Preston, shocked and enraged at his troops for firing at will, screamed at them to stand down. The troops, in a daze, obeyed his command. Some members of the crowd returned to the smoke-filled street, dragging the mortally wounded away from the scene. The next day, thousands of Bostonians led by Samuel Adams demanded that Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson order Lt. Col. William Dalrymple, leader of the British forces, to remove the troops from Boston. Hutchinson could do nothing except comply with the request. Dalrymple and the British Regiments subsequently retired to Castle William on an island just off Boston Harbor. However, their compliance failed to deter Boston leaders from seizing the moment and characterizing the tragedy as a Massacre of St. George's Field on New England soil.14 Although they privately considered the March 5 protestors to be a mob acting improperly outside state authority, the radicals denounced the Boston Massacre in public.15 Samuel Adams, for instance, immediately orchestrated elaborate funeral processions for the victims.16

Paul Revere, meanwhile, busily copied an incendiary image of the skirmish by Henry Pelham that whitened the skin of a principal victim of the Massacre: Samuel Johnson. Before he was thrust into historical memory, residents of Boston knew this former Framingham slave both by his free name of Samuel Johnson and his slave name, Crispus Attucks. His father had been an African, and his mother a Natick Indian named Nancy Attucks, granddaughter to John Attucks, a "praying" Natick executed for treason during King Philip's War. Although most Bostonians did not recognize that "attuck" meant "deer" in the Natick language, Minister Nathaniel Emmons nevertheless remembered him as "that half Indian, half Negro, and altogether rowdy, who should have been strangled before he was born."17

New England's Afro-Indian population had increased dramatically during the years leading up to the American Revolution. Colonial conflicts such as King Philip's War decimated the number of Indian males available for reproduction

13 Maier, From Resistance to Revolution, 194-5.
15 Maier, From Resistance to Revolution, 125-6.
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within tribal enclaves, while enslaved male Africans entered New England at twice the rate of African females. Many male blacks consequently sought sexual gratification and filial attachment with Indian women during the eighteenth century. As the cross-union rate continued to climb, legal categories of race in New England blurred into a confusing milieu of subjective interpretation. That is, white leaders identified “people of color” as Indian, black, or the ambiguous “mulatto”—the last of which hinted at the possibility of white ancestry, either real or imagined—according to the designator that best fit certain legal or rhetorical contexts.18

During the 1760s and early 1770s, cultural representations of blacks and Indians also facilitated white, masculine, and independent notions of a colonial American identity in New England. In plays, engravings, and broadsides, New Englanders defined a virtuous colonial American identity against blacks' subservient status and perceived ignorance. On the other hand, white colonists often demonstrated “noble independence” and “almost indigenous” American roots by donning Indian garb during resistance activities. Actual Indians depicted in broadsides, newspapers, and other resistance propaganda represented “outsiders” and “vicious savages” allied with the British.19 A New England discourse of colonial American identity contributed to such ignoble sentiments. During and after King Philip’s War, Puritans wrote war narratives that defined colonial Americans as virtuous, merciful, and pious against the “cruel” Spanish and the “savage natives.”20 The resistance movement resurrected these war narratives in propaganda form, characterizing the British as even more “savage” than the Indians, yet reiterating the “otherness” of both groups in a new discourse on American identity.21

Paul Revere whitened Crispus Attucks in the March 12 Boston Gazette engraving and a 26 March broadside of the incident because the image of a half-black, half-Indian patriot contradicted New England notions of colonial American identity.22 The description labeled Attucks a “mulatto,” implying the possibility of white ancestry and skin. The corresponding engraving, based on the earlier design by Pelham, depicted Captain Preston actually ordering the soldiers to fire at an unarmed crowd, some of whom attempted to rescue the initial victims of the alleged British onslaught. Hovering over the corpses, a woman draped in black mourned the fallen men, echoing the drama of Mary lamenting Christ’s crucifixion. In one of only two major departures from the Pelham print (aside from minor changes such as switching the direction of the moon and omitting a chimney, steeple, and townhouse sundial), Revere designated the second story of the Customs House, right above the British troops, as “Butcher’s Hall.” In the other major departure, Revere decided to color the broadside. All the men retained white faces and, in keeping with Pelham’s original design, white features. The only figures he chose to darken were two British

19 Sweet, Bodies Politic, 187-193.
21 Lepore, The Name of War, 187-188; Sweet, Bodies Politic, 193-4.
22 For a copy of the engraving, please visit <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bostonmassacre/massacrereverelarge.jpg>.

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troops with malevolent expressions and a dog. In this widely distributed image of the Boston Massacre, Revere transformed Attucks into a homogenous patriot that accorded with white, masculine, and virtuous notions of a colonial American identity.

John Adams, defense counsel for the British troops implicated in the 5 March killings, reconfigured Attucks as a counterpoint for this colonial identity by characterizing him as a half-black, half-Indian savage and the Massacre’s primary instigator. Adams argued that the mob, “under the command” of “Attucks,” emitted a “whistle” akin to “screaming and rending like an Indian yell,” suggesting a band of bloodthirsty savages similar to those found in popular narratives of King Philip’s War. Then this war-painted savage, “whose very looks was enough to terrify any person” and “whose mad behavior, in all probability, the dreadful carnage of that night is chiefly to be ascribed,” ordered the mob to “Kill them! Kill them! Knock them over! And he tried to knock their brains out.” Adams characterized the rest of the protestors as a band of outsiders, “a motley rabble of saucy boys, Negroes and molottoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tars.” The jury, frightened by the memory of King Philip’s War, quickly returned a verdict of acquittal. In November, Edes and Gill published a transcript of the trial that found wide readership. Despite a small number of burlesques written by Samuel Adams in December, the Massachusetts public did not actively denounce the jury’s decision.23

By the end of 1770, radicals had constructed a social memory of the Boston Massacre that allowed New Englanders to continue defining themselves against blacks, Indians, and the British. This “othering” framework formed the basis of New England regional nationalism during the late eighteenth century.24 Elegizing the heterogeneous victims as a homogenous group that corresponded to American national identity subsequently proved a problematic task. When Boston Massacre commemorators did lament a victim, they almost always chose a white casualty. John Hancock, the only orator who mentioned Crispus Attucks, did so in the context of naming all the fallen men. By and large, the radicals refrained from describing or even referring to, any of the deceased protestors. Instead, they used the Massacre commemorations to espouse an imagined American past, fueling the fires of nationalism burning in New England.25

II

Colonial American identity developed into American nationalism when radical resistance developed into revolution, a transformation reflected in the Boston Massacre orations performed within the early American public sphere. In the 1760s,


24 Lepore, The Name of War, xiv.

25 John Hancock, An Oration Delivered March 5, 1774 (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1774; reprint), 8; John Wood Sweet argues that the “significance of race and its complex relationship to notions of nationalism in the years before and during the Revolution has not been fully appreciated.” See Sweet, Bodies Politic, 186.

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radicals hoped that the ostensibly virtuous colonies would reform the British Empire from within the imperial system. Following the Boston Massacre, radicals published propaganda of the skirmish to voice their grievances against the Empire—propaganda that did not espouse revolution or an independent nation. Between 1772 and 1774, however, Royal officials attempted to circumvent colonial legislatures and receive their salaries directly from the Crown. In response, radicals called for independence and engaged in acts that defied British authority, especially after passage of the Intolerable Acts, transforming resistance into revolution.26

In the midst of this transition, white men and women confirmed a “social imaginary” masculine past during Boston Massacre commemorations that facilitated a masculine “horizontal comradeship” among inhabitants of the imagined American nation.27 Most of the orations began with a review of the founding of America, which created a definitional ambiguity between the Puritans and the original colonists, between America and New England. Orators then moved on to describe the “corruption of morals” supposedly caused by the British standing army and its effect on Bostonians’ behavior before and during the Boston Massacre; a tragedy which in turn served as the pretext first for concluding remarks on resistance measures, and later, American nationalism. However, these orations did not exist in a cultural vacuum. Crowds and radical orators across British North America began to negotiate regional national consciousness alongside a burgeoning national print culture. In New England, this cultural negotiation and approbation by upper and lower orders came in the form of applause, cheering, post-oration festivities, and other crowd actions in the early American public sphere. This public sphere consisted of printed materials expressing both rational-critical and wild discourse, coffeehouse-tavern discussion, fetes, and commemorations where early American peoples created an imagined nationhood by “gate-keeping”—collective assent, dissent, or qualified acceptance of formal political acts.28

26 See Maier, From Resistance to Revolution.


28 Sandra Gustafson holds that a “vernacular political oratory emerged as a formal genre with a national audience in tandem with the expansion of print culture.” Patriot orators “created novel modes of nationalist identity based on their public performances” in the “public sphere.” See Sandra M. Gustafson, Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 169-70. The early American public sphere deviates from the bourgeois...
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Every year around March or April, bells tolled in Boston during the day, while lanterns flickered on ghostly transparencies of white Massacre victims at sunset, awing children and adults alike. The crowds that attended the subsequent afternoon and early evening speeches included both white men and women, indicating the acceptance of an imagined masculine past by multiple sets of these gendered audiences—an annual and persistent acceptance that gave birth to New England regional nationalism. In a 1773 diary entry, for instance, John Adams expressed his shock at the sheer diversity of the crowd in the Old South Church, the setting for the “invented tradition” of the Boston Massacre orations. “That large Church,” he wrote in wonder, “was filled and crowded in every Pew, Seat, Alley, and Gallery, by an Audience of several Thousands of People of All Ages and Characters and of both Sexes.”

On 2 April 1771, Minister James Lovell commenced the first of these orations, providing a foundation for the later nationalist orations by espousing an imagined colonial past, although he called for resistance measures rather than independence. After short remarks on the horror of the tragedy, he abruptly turned to constructing an American past. British North American history began not in Virginia’s Jamestown, but when the Puritans “left their native land, risked all the dangers of the sea, and came to this then-savage desert.” He proclaimed that the people of Boston “showed upon the alarming call for trial that their brave spirit still exists in vigor, though their legacy of rights is much impaired.” After decrying, in the republican style, the corruption of standing armies and the virtues of militias, Lovell again returned to his narrative of the colonial past. He declared the “compact” that the Puritan settlers made with the British king to be Massachusetts’ only true legislative authority. He chose not to “enlarge upon the character of those first settlers,” even if they did “defend their religion and their lives from the greatest inland danger of the savage natives,” as represented in popular accounts of King Philip’s War, because he wished to implore the audience to perpetuate Puritan...
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virtues into the perilous future. Republicanism could not be perpetuated by independence and war, but by allowing the Royal government in Boston to enjoy the common protection of the British Constitution. Lovell finished his speech to "the universal Acceptance of a crowded Audience," indicating the "Acceptance" of this regional construction of the American past, by a "universal" representation of Boston society, in the public sphere.

On 5 March 1772, Dr. Joseph Warren reiterated this regional construction of the colonial past in the second oration. According to Warren, the American colonies would counteract venality with virtue and reform the British Empire. Evidence for inevitable fulfillment of this prophecy could be found in the American colonial past—which of course began in the northern rather than southern colonies. He explained that the Puritans, after their initial settlement, secured a new charter during the British Glorious Revolution of 1688, which promised liberties and immunities to all British subjects.

Building upon Lovell's imagined narrative, Warren extolled Bostonians for not falling prey to the moral corruption of the standing army stationed in the city, despite the efforts of British troops to replace Boston men in the gendered patriarchy of New England. Resistance against growing imperial tyranny brought the arrival of an army to Massachusetts, engendering "a corruption of morals . . . this is one of the effects of quartering troops in a populous city." The republican trope of "corruption" had suddenly taken a sexual turn. This "baneful influence" of "standing armies" caused the Boston Massacre; "for, by a corruption of morals, the public happiness is immediately affected." According to Warren, the standing army raped the city's "beauteous virgins" who were then "exposed to all, [by] the insolence of unbridled passion." The sexual domination of Boston women by British troops had undermined the traditional roles of New England patriarchs. In response, men's "hearts beat to arms; we snatched our weapons." Fortunately, "propitious heaven forbad the bloody carnage," for the "inbred affection to Great Britain" among all males prevented "an immediate recourse to the sword." For now, he advised the audience to be wary of British corruption; but earlier in the oration, in a moment of courage, he ventured to assert that whenever government by consent is lost, the constitution must be destroyed. He also hinted that in new communities, citizens freshly remembered the equality of their natural state, preventing people "cloathed with authority" from violating natural rights. By the close of his speech, Warren retreated from these radical insinuations of independence, simply hoping to be a shining beacon of virtue in the corrupt British Empire. In three years' time, Warren would attempt to legitimate his position as a

33 Lovell, An Oration Delivered April 2nd 1771, 18.
34 Boston Evening Post, April 8, 1771.
35 Dr. Joseph Warren, An Oration Delivered March 5th, 1772 (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1772), 9.
36 Warren, An Oration Delivered March 5th, 1772, 12.
38 Warren, An Oration Delivered March 5th, 1772, 13.
39 Warren, An Oration Delivered March 5th, 1772, 8.
40 Warren, An Oration Delivered March 5th, 1772, 6.
leader in a new and revolutionary Massachusetts community by expanding the colonial past in national directions, as well as by literally appearing "cloathed with authority.\textsuperscript{41}

According to newspaper accounts, the heterogeneous crowd composed of both men and women confirmed this gendered construction of the American past in the public sphere with cheers and a unanimous declaration of gratitude. This mob, who had "crowded to hear the ORATION in such Numbers, that it was with much Difficulty that the Orator reached the pulpit [in the Old South Church]," gave him "universal applause" and then these "Fellow Citizens voted him their Thanks." In the evening, the crowd met at "Mrs. Clapham's in King Street" for a social gathering; the meeting was marked by a "lively representation of the bloody Massacre" on her balcony that commemorated "the Retrospect of so horrid a Transaction."\textsuperscript{42}

At the end of the year, the Boston insurgency shifted its aims from resistance to independence, revolution, and nationalism, a transition reflected in the Boston Massacre commemorations.\textsuperscript{43} In June 1772 Royal Governor Hutchinson declared that he and the Massachusetts judiciary would bypass colonial assemblies and receive their salaries directly from the British government. Incensed radicals, despite the dissolution of the colonial non-importation agreement and removal of troops from Boston city proper, continued to rouse popular resentment against the British Parliament. They also vociferously denounced imposition of the sole remaining Townshend duty: the tax on tea. Boston radicals subsequently initiated the first Committee of Correspondence, an organization that bequeathed formal political roles to radical leaders in outright rebellion against the British Empire.\textsuperscript{44}

On 5 March 1773, in the Old South Church, Dr. Benjamin Church delivered the first oration that argued for a national future, signifying the demise of resistance sentiments and the rise of American nationalism. Church presented the American past in reverse chronological order, beginning with a gendered vision of the national future and ending with Puritan beginnings. He declared that only a masculine union could perpetuate the virtue of America. "The general infraction of the rights of all the colonies," he argued in a footnote, "must finally reduce the discordant provinces, to a necessary combination for their mutual interest and defence." He defined this, "collective power of the whole," as a "state or society of men" during the actual oration, denoting the masculine contours of the imagined American nation.\textsuperscript{45}

Church subsequently repeated James Lovell's and Joseph Warren's vision of the American past. After the Boston Massacre, "dire was the interval of rage, fierce was the conflict of the soul." Posing a rhetorical question to unseen challengers of

\textsuperscript{41} Warren, \textit{An Oration Delivered March 5th, 1772}, 18.

\textsuperscript{42} The Connecticut Journal, March 30, 1772; The Boston Gazette, March 9, 1772.

\textsuperscript{43} Maier, \textit{From Resistance to Revolution}, 228-271.


\textsuperscript{45} Dr. Benjamin Church, \textit{An Oration Delivered March 5th 1773: The Fourth Edition} (Boston: J. Greenleaf, 1773), 12-13; This first explicit argument for union in 1773 corresponds to Pauline Maier's findings that, between 1772 and 1774, resistance transformed into revolution.
this interpretation, Church asked, “Did not the consideration of our expiring LIBERTIES, impel us to remorseless havock?” Fortunately, the supposed “havock” apparently subsided in Boston after the tragedy. In contrast to Warren’s secular explanation for this constructed turn of events—“the inbred affection to Great-Britain”—Church described “the guardian GOD of New-England” as suddenly thundering over the murderous city, ordering her inhabitants, “PEACE, BE STILL,” and thus “hush’d was the bursting war.” Like Warren, he attributed the actual cause of the Boston Massacre and the behavior of Bostonians to the “foul oppression, of quartering troops, in populous cities, in times of peace.” In keeping with the Puritan tradition of both Lovell and Warren, he reminded the audience that “they owed their ancestors” the duty to separate from Britain and perpetuate civic virtue.46

Men and women in the crowd confirmed this imagined national past and its gendered conception of the American nation by cheering Church and further commemorating the Boston Massacre that evening. He “had the universal applause of his Audience,” a crowd that consisted of “great many Inhabitants, and many of the Clergy, not only of this, but of neighbouring Towns.” Once again, the crowd attended a social gathering at Mrs. Clapham’s to commemorate the tragedy with drinks and festivities.47 If the sentiments of John Adams, former defender of the British troops, served as any indication of the audience’s confirmation of Church’s narrative, then Church had successfully accomplished his goals. Although Adams still believed “the Verdict of the Jury was exactly right,” he wrote in his diary that this “however is no Reason why the Town should not call the Action of that Night a Massacre.” He finished the entry with a republican flourish, endorsing Church’s proposition that the Boston Massacre “is the strongest of Proofs of the Danger of standing Armies.”48

Just months after Church’s oration, Boston’s Royal Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, thwarted attempts by insurgency leaders to bypass the tax on tea. In response to Hutchinson’s actions and the East India Company’s monopoly on tea distribution in Boston, Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, and others disguised themselves as Indians on the night of December 16. Radicals and their supporters boarded the ships and tossed approximately 10,000 British monetary pounds of East India Company tea into the Atlantic.49

John Hancock delivered the fourth commemorative oration three months after this Boston Tea Party. According to his version of events, the very presence of British troops inverted the proper, gendered roles of republican male and female citizens of Boston, a mark of standing army corruption. The soldiers attempted to implement a nefarious scheme in order “to betray our youth of one sex [males] into extravagance and effeminacy, and of the other [females] to infamy and ruin.” He concentrated especially on women, because “the female breast” protected and harbored the essence of virtue in Boston society. Despite the solidity of virtue in

46 Church, An Oration Delivered March 5th 1773, 19-20.
47 The New Hampshire Gazette, March 8, 1773.
49 Middleton, Colonial America, 469.

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“the female breast,” however, Hancock bemoaned a few young ladies who had fallen prey, either by charm or by force, to the sexual prowess of British soldiers.50

Hancock reiterated the radical interpretation of the Boston Massacre, contending that only the extraordinary virtue of Bostonians shielded them from the corruption of British soldiers. If indeed America had been infected by the corrosive influence of the British, he asked his audience if they wondered what “with-held the ready arm of vengeance from executing instant justice on the vile assassins? Perhaps your fear’d promiscuous carnage might ensue” alongside the outbreak of sexual promiscuity. Apparently, only “general compassion” emanating from “the noble bosoms of Americans” stifled their violent rage.51

He concluded the narrative by presenting the audience with a suggested national path, a climax that became characteristic of the orations. “Let US also be ready to take the field whenever danger calls,” Hancock thundered, “let us be united and strengthen the hands of each other, by promoting a general union among us.” Although the Committees of Correspondence had done much for national cohesion, only a national Congress of Deputies could facilitate a “uniting” of the “Inhabitants of the whole Continent.”52

John Hancock spurred the Boston Massacre orations to new heights: to the republican past and national future of America he added exemplary protagonists, transforming himself and other Boston men from insurgent radicals into national founding heroes. “Sure I am,” he bellowed, “I should not incur your displeasure, if I paid a respect so justly due to their much honoured characters in this public place [or public sphere]; but when I name an ADAMS, such a numerous host of Fellow-patriots rush upon my mind, that I fear it would take up too much of your time.” In any case, he boasted, “their revered names, in all succeeding times, shall grace the annals of America. From them, let us, my friends, take example.”53 By cheering Hancock and giving him their “universal Approbation” after this closing statement, Boston men and women confirmed a gendered version of the American past and a founding patriot myth in the public sphere.54

Passage of the Intolerable Acts in late 1774 undermined radical leadership by circumscribing the Massachusetts governing charter, closing Boston Harbor, and authorizing another British occupation of the city. The British ordered the Boston populace to recognize the king as the ultimate political authority, not colonial Americans like John Hancock. Thus, radical leaders needed not only to keep the nationalist cause alive but simultaneously to protect their formal political roles in the public sphere from British encroachment.

51 Hancock, *An Oration Delivered March 5, 1774*, 7.
52 Hancock, *An Oration Delivered March 5, 1774*, 13.
53 Hancock, *An Oration Delivered March 5, 1774*, 14-5.
54 *New Hampshire Gazette*, March 11, 1774.

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Joseph Warren, the next orator, attempted to accomplish this goal by altering his physical appearance in order to assert political authority. A letter featured in the March 16 edition of the *New York Gazeteer*, by an anonymous “Spectator,” described the scene. The radicals, “assembled in the pulpit [of the Old South Church], which was covered with black, and we all sat gaping at one another above an hour expecting” the orator’s arrival. At long last, “a single horse chair stopped at the Apothecary’s, opposite the Meeting.” Joseph Warren “descended” from the traveling chair and entered the shop, “followed by a servant, with a bundle.” To the surprise of the “Spectator,” the “bundle” turned out to be a “Ciceronian Toga.” Warren strode into the Apothecary’s building where he evidently “robed himself.” From the open church door, the audience watched in fascination as he exited the shop, “proceeded across the street to the Meeting, and being received into the pulpit, he was announced by one of his fraternity to be the person appointed to declaim on the occasion.” Warren raised his body to its fullest height as he faced the audience, “then put himself into a Demosthenian posture, with a white handkerchief in his right hand,” and commenced the fifth annual Boston Massacre oration.55

The spread of revolutionary sentiments across New England challenged its progenitors, including Joseph Warren, to assert their leadership positions in the new revolutionary movement. The idea of a natural aristocracy, intertwined with political theorist James Harrington’s belief that only propertied, independent, and therefore virtuous males should govern, had its roots in the Ciceronian critique of the last generation of the Roman Republic. Hereditary ties theoretically held no place in republican political systems; only complete propertied independence from potentially tyrannical others qualified a citizen as a virtuous potential leader. Orators, however, could not easily display their virtuous independence to audiences. Joseph Warren, though, had arrived at a solution to this dilemma: he established himself as a member of the American natural aristocracy by becoming Cicero. In the Old South Church stood the reincarnation of this original natural aristocrat, commemorating a tragedy caused by the corruption of standing armies, and once again critiquing a decadent government—this time, the once glorious British state. Nothing less than a transposition of past into present legitimated this audacious claim to patriarchal power.56

In Warren’s version of the colonial past, King Philip’s War and other Puritan conflicts with “savage” Indian villains became the prelude for rebellion against a corrupt British Empire. His imaginary story began in a familiar manner: an “English subject” discovered what would be “our country in 1620.” “Our ancestors,” the Puritans or “American forefathers,” apparently for every colony in British North America, reached an agreement with “King James I for certain lands in North-America,” allegedly purchased “legally” from the “savage natives.” Soon “the fields began to wave with ripening harvests.”57 Then “the savage natives saw with wonder the delightful change and quickly formed a scheme to obtain that by fraud or force,


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which nature meant as the reward of industry alone.” Fortunately, the Puritans “were not less ready to take the field for battle than for labour; and the insidious foe was driven from their borders as often as he ventured to disturb them.”

After reiterating the Boston Massacre “corruption of morals” narrative, he argued that the prospective national union remained the closing act of the “drama.” This argument contained three contentions. First, Warren believed that colonial resistance to Parliamentary taxation sparked a national inquiry into the nature of constitutionalism in all of the colonies. Second, the Boston Port Bill had engendered “sympathetic feelings for a brother in distress” in a unified and masculine nation. Third, the British Empire’s mutilation of the Massachusetts governing charter struck fear in similar colonial governments, forming a national sentiment of defense. This defense would succeed, Warren added in a statement that contradicted his own interpretation of Boston Massacre causes, because “the exactness and beauty of [the British military’s] discipline inspire our youth with order and in the pursuit of military knowledge.”

The toga-clad Warren had asserted his own authority to lead by transforming himself into a classical member of the natural aristocracy, uniting his audience by defining their nationalism against imaginary “savages,” and ending with a promise that the sanctions against Boston would spawn the militant birth of a nation. Although independence had not been “our aim,” he concluded, “if these pacific measures [of the Continental Congress] are ineffectual, and it appears that the only way to safety is, through fields of blood, I know you will not turn your faces from your foes.” He persuaded the crowd that they held a central place in this dramatic event of America’s past. In exchange for their presumed consent of his formal political role in the public sphere, Warren assured the audience that “future generations, who fired by your example, shall emulate your virtues, and learn from you the heavenly art of making millions happy.”

According to the “Spectator,” Warren “was applauded by the mob,” confirming his version of the American past and his leadership position in New England. After the clamor subsided, a British officer yelled to his troops, “Fie, fie, fie!”—The gallerians apprehending fire, fire [an order to discharge] bounced out of the windows, and swarmed down the gutters.” Suddenly, the “43rd Regiment, returning accidentally from exercise, with drums beating, threw the whole body into the utmost consternation.” For the audience, these British actions confirmed the radicals’ narrative account of the Boston Massacre. Protests against the 43rd Regiment also represented the crowd’s rejection of formal British authority in the public sphere, even as they embraced Joseph Warren as their rightful leader.

Although most of the audience applauded Warren, the “Spectator” observed that others “groaned” after the speech. When military conflict broke out between Minutemen and British troops at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, Boston radicals decided to silence these and other dissenting voices to their cause, revealing

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the fiction of nationalist union promoted by orators.63 Joseph Warren led the charge on 8 May at the extra-legal Massachusetts Provincial Congress in Watertown. As President of the Congress, he signed into law a bill that ordered “the several Committees of Correspondence . . . to enquire into the Principles and Conduct of such suspected Persons.” These “suspected Persons” would have to give investigators “full and ample Assurances . . . of their Readiness to join their Countrymen on all Occasions, in Defence of the Rights and Liberties of America.”64

Joseph Warren next endorsed, and most likely authored, a law that closed provincial borders and mandated that neighbor spy on neighbor in order to validate radicals’ espousals of a unified front. The Provincial Congress led by Warren resolved to prevent any Massachusetts inhabitant from removing “themselves and Effects out of this Colony into the Government of Nova-Scotia, and elsewhere.” Congress proclaimed that “no Person” could leave Massachusetts “unless he shall obtain the Permission of the Committee of Correspondence of the Town he belongs to.” The bill empowered all the members of every such Committee to observe and report on “the Motions of all such Persons whom they have Reason to suspect.”65

While radicals argued that American virtue prompted all people to support independence, the persecution of Loyalists became a paid enterprise. The heavy losses that General Gage’s regiments incurred at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill in June, which took the life of Joseph Warren, induced the British government to replace Gage with General William Howe. Before Gage departed in the fall of 1775, a contingent of Massachusetts Loyalists pleaded with him to voice their “approbation” of “the King” when he arrived in England, hoping to secure protection from an increasingly hostile New England populace.66 Warren’s death had evidently not stopped the crackdown on Loyalists. In January of 1776, the Massachusetts House of Representatives placed an advertisement in New England newspapers for the capture of “Dr. Samuel Gelston . . . apprehended as an enemy to this country.” They added that whoever, “will take up said Gelston and deliver him to the messenger of the House of Representatives, shall be well rewarded for his time and expence.”67

Meanwhile, Peter Thacher reiterated the American historical narrative at the next Boston Massacre oration on 5 March 1776. He included the “Tragedy” of Lexington and Concord as well as Bunker’s Hill, linking these conflicts again with the corruption of standing armies.68 He then praised “General Warren” as the model “inflexible patriot,” Thacher lambasted Warren’s “savage enemies” that exulted over “his corpse, beautiful even in death,” promising “a monument to thy memory” and guaranteeing Warren’s central place in American historical memory “to the latest ages.”69 He closed with a resounding “O GOD, LET AMERICA BE FREE!”70

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63 New York Gazetteer, March 16, 1775.
64 Massachusetts Provincial Congress, “Whereas there are...” (Watertown: Broadside, May 8, 1775).
65 Massachusetts Provincial Congress, “Whereas there are...” (Watertown: Broadside, May 15, 1775).
66 Various Loyalists, An Address of the Gentlemen and Principal Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, to His Excellency Governor GAGE (Boston: Gage Correspondence, 1775).
67 Massachusetts House of Representatives, “Advertisement” (Watertown: Broadside, January 26, 1776).
68 Peter Thacher, An Oration Delivered at Watertown on March 5th 1776 (Watertown: Benjamin Edes, 1776), 9-10.
69 Thacher, An Oration Delivered at Watertown on March 5th 1776, 11-12.
70 Thacher, An Oration Delivered at Watertown on March 5th 1776, 15.

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As the war progressed, the physical exclusion of Loyalists and state seizure of their property facilitated the myth of consensus and thrust them alongside the British, blacks, and Indians as essential counterparts for the collective sense of a now manifest national consciousness. Hundreds of Loyalists from the New England countryside streamed into Boston, hoping to elicit protection from General Howe and the British Regiments. On 19 April 1776, the Massachusetts House of Representatives ordered the Committees of Safety to “take Possession of all such estates,” both personal and real, that belonged to fleeing Loyalists. By 1776, the Boston radicals had devised such a familiar American history and collective identity in the public sphere—supported by the patriotic sentiments of allies in other colonies—that separation seemed an almost inevitable and necessary dénouement to American colonial history. That July, delegates to the Second Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence.71

III

Doctor Thomas Welsh stood before a Boston crowd on 5 March 1783, peering into their eager eyes and exhausted faces. Throughout the bitter war years, radicals had persisted in calling for oratorical commemorations on the Boston Massacre, always successful in gathering crowds that consisted of every age, sex, and social rank. Welsh told his audience a story that day of a corrupt imperial government abridging the rights of a virtuous colony, forcing a standing army upon her people. Corruption sparked a tragedy, a massacre, but did not stir the inhabitants to violence; rather, the birthing “pangs” of retribution “were sharp indeed which ushered into life, a nation!” This event, in a single city within the vast expanse of America, gave birth to “an independent nation; she has now to maintain her dignity and importance among the kingdoms of the earth.”72 Surely, he concluded, this tragedy comprised “a manly and fortunate beginning” to a masculine national history. Finishing the speech, Welsh beamed at men and women in the audience as the last of the Boston Massacre orations came to a raucous end.73

American nationalism, however, continued well past the final Boston Massacre commemoration. In the early Republic, regions legitimated the primacy of their interests in the nation by associating themselves with the federal union, employing the usual nationalist rhetoric and patriotic festivities in the public sphere. New Englanders, for example, published American histories that placed themselves at the center of the national narrative. They also continued to define themselves against the British, but replaced Loyalists with southerners in this “othering” framework. In the 1790s, for instance, New England Federalists linked themselves with American patriotism while equating southern Democratic-Republicans with radical Jacobins of the French Revolution.74

Blacks and Indians continued to serve as counterparts for a masculine American nationalism in New England. During the early nineteenth century, white New Englanders associated national identity with imagined Indian innocence and masculinity, celebrating indigenous people in a past Indian Golden Age. In contrast, they continued to propagate the subjugated status of women, while ridiculing urban

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71 Massachusetts House of Representatives, In the House of Representatives (Watertown: Broadside, 1776).
72 Dr. Thomas Welsh, An Oration Delivered March 5th 1783 (Boston: John Gill, 1783), 13.
73 Welsh, An Oration Delivered March 5th 1783, 17.
free blacks for a perceived dysfunctional lifestyle. That is, white New Englanders defined their regional nationalism against "others" striving to enter the proto-capitalist economy. A black print public sphere attempted to counter these white male notions of national identity and citizenship, resurrecting Crispus Attucks as a symbol of black patriotism during the American Revolution. Yet, knowledge of Attucks' Indian mother faded from American memory as this counter-public print placed emphasis solely on his African heritage. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century, New Englanders turned once again to denigrating both actual and imagined indigenous peoples.75

Social memory of the Boston Massacre thus provided a foundation for a regional nationalism of the early Republic. As New Englanders fashioned an exclusionary American identity and participated in a nationalism that defined America as New England, and the American past as the New England past, communities across the country engaged in similar rites of regional nationalism. Diverse constructions of a masculine nation consequently vied for legitimacy in the simultaneous fragmentation and fusion of an imagined Union.

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