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“REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POSTMASTER” Reading, Institutions, and the American Public, Post-revolution and 1965

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“REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POSTMASTER”
Reading, Institutions, and the American Public, Post-revolution and 1965

Senior Project Submitted to
The Divisions of Language and Literature
and
Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Life is long and full of surprises.

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Introduction:

“Before we ascribe sovereignty to the people, we have to imagine that there is such a thing.”¹

—Edmund Morgan

This project explores how the American people constitutes itself, but begins with mail delivery. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas reads a blurb on a letter which says “REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POSTMASTER.”² Oedipa doesn’t know who the letter is from, she doesn’t know who wrote the blurb, and she doesn’t know what a postmaster is. Yet she follows the instructions. Oedipa immediately rereads the letter to look for “dirty words,”³ presumably to report the obscenities. She recognizes that she has must have a “postmaster,” even if she has never heard of this person before. What moves her to this obedience? This moment of reading apparently brings Oedipa into a relationship with an institution, the Post Office, and her “postmaster.” She seems to behave as a law-abiding member of the public simply because she reads herself addressed as such.

The founding moment of the American Republic includes such a moment where an address being read establishes the relationship between subjects and an institution. The “We” of the Constitution’s preamble calls on the authority of a political public to “ordain and establish” the founding document. The reader is addressed, for the first time, as a member of the American “people” whose authority is being claimed. This document includes the reader in the “people”

¹ Morgan, Edmund S. *Inventing the people: The rise of popular sovereignty in England and America*. WW Norton & Company, 1989.

² Pynchon, Thomas. "The Crying of Lot 49. 1966." *New York: Harperperennial* (2006), 33.

³ Pynchon, 33.

while simultaneously claiming to speak with their collective voice. Another text of this early period in American history, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, addresses its audience in a way which imagines a particular American people. The first Postmaster General of the United States, it's notable that neither the Post Office nor mail delivery comes up in Franklin's autobiography. Just as Oedipa doesn't know what a postmaster even is, she asks "what is a postmaster?"⁴ the position is not highlighted. Other institutions, however, receive significant attention in the autobiography. The library, for instance, establishes a reading public which is said to become the American political public. The addresses that begin these texts attempt to bring readers into a relationship with institutions that include them in the American political public.

On July 26th, 1775, the Second Continental Congress founded the United State Post Office and named Benjamin Franklin the first Postmaster General of the United States. Colonial postal services (also headed by Franklin) predate this founding and it is worth considering whether having a colonies-spanning postal service allowed colonists, prior to the founding of their nation, to imagine themselves collectively as one people. This project, however, explores texts from the post-revolutionary moment of founding a people. Specifically, this project will explore how texts imagine their readerships, and how that imagining can contribute to newly independent Americans' ability to imagine themselves as members of a public. The official Post Office Department of the federal government was established in 1792 and continued operation until 1971 when it was transformed into the United States Postal Service (USPS), an agency of the federal government. The history of this department of the U.S. government bookends the two moments in American history on which this project will focus.

⁴ Pynchon, 33

In the post-revolutionary period, this project will examine *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, as well as the preamble to the Constitution, to study the imagining of the American political public at work in these texts and how institutions helped make being a people imaginable to their American readership. The latter half of the project will look at texts published in 1965, the year when, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, the Voting Rights Act was made law. This law attempted to codify a reimagining of who belonged in the American political public and, specifically, who American institution needed to represent. To consider how a reimagining of the people is possible, this project looks at two texts published that year: *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told by Alex Haley*. 1965 was a watershed countercultural moment where, these texts suggest, it was possible to reimagine the American public. In the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, “historical metafiction seems oriented to the year 1965.”⁵ It is this collision of history and fiction which makes 1965 uniquely interesting for this project. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* offers an attempt at reimagining the American people in the critical countercultural moment of 1965. Not only does the autobiography publish the experience of a black American in his own words, it provides an alternative narrative of the history of the African American community. This alternative history attempts to reimagine that community’s place in American society.

This project will draw on the work of theorists who study the foundational moment of American nationhood. Michael Warner’s readings of texts from this period explore how the reading public brought the American political public into being. That, along with what Warner will describe as Benjamin Franklin’s “fantasy of being-in-print,”⁶ shows an American readership beginning to imagine itself as a public. Jason Frank’s analysis of how American institutions

⁵ Cowart, David. *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*. University of Georgia Press, 2011, 86.

⁶ Warner, Michael. *Franklin and the Letters of the Republic*. University of California Press, 1986:11.

contributed to the people's ability to imagine themselves a collective public will contribute to an exploration of how institutions such as the Post Office, and in particular the library, helped establish a readership that could become the public. Bonnie Honig's work on constitutional and deliberative democratic theory helps this project explore moments where the people's will is utilized in a moment of political founding. Such moments of individuals becoming political subjects are explored through Althusser's work on interpellation. The "We," of the Constitution is explored as such a moment of Althusserian address and J.L. Austin's work on performative utterances will help this project consider how the addresses of these works can perform such action. The historical work of Edmund Morgan and Gordon Wood is used to contextualize the historical circumstances of the post-revolution public and Benjamin Franklin's place in it. Part 2 of this project will use some of these theorists to examine the way that alternative historical narratives open the possibilities of reimagining the political public. An examination of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* helps this project understand the power of memory as historical narrative. Pierre Macherey and Franz Fanon study addresses which interpellates black individuals as particularly racialized subjects and help explore how historical narratives contribute to racial marginalization.

In the moment of its publishing, the Constitution took on the voice of a "We" without explaining to its reader whom this "We" signified. "We" simply meant the "people." But who comprised this "people," the political public, was not at all clear, and it was a considerable claim for this document to attempt to speak with the voice of that people. The address "We" includes the reader in the "people." The reader can either reject their place in the "We" or consent to what that "We" has decided to ordain and establish in the following document. But, as readers and the context of reading evolve historically, it's reasonable to assume that whom is addressed by

“We,” and who consents to that establishment, evolve as well. Examining two separate moments of reading will provide a sense of the relationship between reading and the political public.

The first chapter, therefore, will focus on the post-revolution moment of founding to explore the first widespread imagining of the American people in its two primary texts. This original understanding of the “people,” and how interpellation into that public takes place, gives this project a foundation for this its second chapter, which will examine the massive shifts in that imagining dealt with in second chapter’s two primary texts. In 1965, huge numbers of African Americans demanded recognition as members of the American political public on a number of levels. Most important for this project’s purpose, they sought to have black Americans’ right to vote codified in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In demanding representation and institutional recognition, Civil Rights leaders demanded to be members of the American public, to be included in the “We.” This challenged many mainstream imaginings of the American public and opened a nationwide public debate over who Americans imagine to belong in the “people.” This project reads this struggle in how texts of these periods imagine their readership and the historical narratives they produce.

Part 1: Post-Revolution

Chapter 1

“The First Downright American:”⁷ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

“Oh, Franklin was the first downright American.”⁸

—D.H. Lawrence

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin opens with the address “Dear Son,”⁹ which may confuse many modern readers who are not, in all likelihood, the son of Benjamin Franklin. Although Franklin probably did begin the project with the intention to write a family history for his son, by the end he clearly intended the text for public consumption. Although he did not live to see the work’s publication, before he died Franklin reoriented the autobiography to speak to a public audience of young Americans. Yet the address remains, imagining the reader as “Son.” Historian Gordon Wood argues that Franklin’s autobiography, among similar texts, “had an inordinate influence on America’s understanding of itself” and allowed ordinary people to “construct an enduring sense of American nationhood.”¹⁰ This insight is particularly notable in pointing out that a sense of “nationhood” is something that America, and therefore the American public, had to “construct.” The autobiography, for Wood, actively works to construct this identity. This project will examine not the impact of the text on the public but the text itself to see this imagining take place, beginning with how the text imagines its readership.

⁷ Lawrence, David Herbert, Ezra Greenspan, and Lindeth Vasey. *Studies in classic American literature*. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁸ Lawrence.

⁹ Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography and other writings*. Edited by Kenneth Silverman. Penguin Books, 1986: 3.

¹⁰ Wood, Gordon S. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. Penguin, 2005, 244.

Benjamin Franklin believed that a man, a life, could be rewritten. To explore this concept, Michael Warner cites Franklin's epitaph, which Franklin wrote himself. It describes the deceased as a "Work" and his eventual resurrection as a reprinting into a "more perfect edition."¹¹ Warner says that this draws readers into a "fantasy of being-in-print" because it "treats print and life in equivalent terms."¹² Franklin as a man, as a life, exists as a text to be written, published, and edited. This fantasy is framed at the beginning of the autobiography when Franklin says that the "Thing most like living one's Life over again, seems to be a *Recollection* of that Life, and to make that Recollection as durable as possible, the putting it down in Writing."¹³ For Franklin, his autobiography is a reification of his life. He writes himself down into paper as a way to endure and, importantly, to give himself the opportunity to fix certain Errata. Franklin intends to use his autobiography, his life's "second edition to correct some Faults of the first."¹⁴ Later, he will call these faults "Errata,"¹⁵ a printer's terms for publishing mistakes which further establishes the idea of Franklin's life as printed text. This statement of Franklin's intent to correct faults reveals part of this text's agenda. It will not necessarily present the most objectively accurate account of Franklin's life, but will present this life the way Franklin wants it presented. The autobiography presents not a historically objective Franklin but a textually imagined character. The author retains the right to make some corrections.

The autobiography imagines not only Franklin, but also actively works to imagine its readership. Not only is an imaginary construction of the writer produced in the text, but an equally powerful imaginary construction of the reader. The autobiography opens with a line on the location and year of the writing which reads "*Twyford, at the Bishop of St. Asaph's 1771,*"

¹¹ Warner, 111.

¹² Warner, 111.

¹³ Franklin, 4.

¹⁴ Franklin, 3.

¹⁵ Franklin, 21.

followed by the salutation “Dear Son.”¹⁶ This opening structure reflects a letter and presumes a familial intimacy between Franklin and the reader. One explanation for this structure is that the autobiography was originally meant for his son. It is important to take this intention seriously because, although some scholars have suggested that such addresses were simply poetic device common in memoirs at the time, historian Gordon Wood’s research has indicated that in the beginning of the project Franklin probably did intend the work to be specifically for his son.¹⁷ Yet, by the time the work was published either Franklin or his posthumous publishers could have changed the opening address to reflect the expanded readership. It is reasonable to read this moment as Franklin addressing this wider readership, the American public,¹⁸ with “Dear Son.” Therefore, it is worth considering how “Dear Son” imagines that wider readership. The reader is younger than Franklin and related to him. They share a family history. Of course, one could read this paternal bond literally if the reader were Franklin’s actual son, but the address “son” also establishes a metaphorical relationship between Franklin and his reading public. Franklin is a “Founding Father” and a cultural icon of America’s founding. He’s even been given the moniker “the first American.”¹⁹ In his autobiography, he produces a work meant to preserve his life for posterity and he addresses it to a new generation of Americans, the “sons” of the Founding Father. Franklin addresses a particular type of reader, here a son, to imagine the entirety of his readership as “son.” This address constructs a readership that, like a son, inherits his history and his lineage.

¹⁶ Franklin, 3.

¹⁷ Wood, 139.

¹⁸ The original 1791 publication was in fact in French. An edition in English did not come out until 1793. Although much of the autobiography’s original audience was European, this project focuses specifically on an American readership.

¹⁹ Brands, Henry William. *The first American: The life and times of Benjamin Franklin*. Anchor, 2010.

This imagination of readership necessarily includes an assumption of British heritage which historian Edmund Morgan argues was necessary for establishing the colonists' collective identity. From the outset, the reader is told that he descends from Franklin's British family. Franklin's entire readership is addressed as the "son" of this founding father, thus the entire readership is imagined to share this descent. According to Morgan, this isn't far from how the first Americans imagined their heritage. Morgan traces what he sees as a tendency of American colonists in the revolutionary period to speak "of England as 'home,' even though they had never been there."²⁰ Morgan argues that this imagined collective home stems from an imagined collective past, even if "the past as it existed in their minds may have borne little resemblance to what actually happened."²¹ A similar imagining is happening when Americans read the opening of Franklin's autobiography. Regardless of the actual circumstances of the reader's past, the address necessitates that the reader imagine himself²² as Franklin's "son," and therefore as descended from the history and heritage that the text describes. Franklin describes his own interest in his ancestry, telling the reader that he collected "Anecdotes of [his] Ancestors." In this same vein, Franklin reports, he is writing his autobiography in order to collect the "Circumstances of [his] Life...for you."²³ This autobiography serves as an ancestral narrative. The "you" here is supposedly Franklin's son but any reader is addressed as the "you" and thus signified as the recipient of this ancestral narrative. Such narratives of founding are central to how a community organizes itself.

Jean-Luc Nancy's formulation of the founding myth in *Myth Interrupted* creates a framework for understanding how Franklin's ancestral narrative imagines a public. Nancy's

²⁰ Morgan, Edmund Sears. *The birth of the republic*. University of Chicago Press, 1956, 6.

²¹ Morgan, 6.

²² Although a thorough analysis of the gender politics of this historical moment are beyond the scope of this project, the address "son" signals that Franklin's text imagines an explicitly male readership.

²³ Franklin, 4.

storyteller gather together listeners and “recounts to them their history.”²⁴ Franklin’s ancestral history performs this same action for the reader, his “son.” Franklin’s autobiography gathers together listeners through a publishing and distribution which creates a readership that his text can address. This is how the autobiography can be important for how the public imagines itself as a nation, as Morgan argues. A shared history serves as the foundation for a shared identity. Franklin’s autobiography shares many features of Nancy’s myth, justifying the comparison. For instance, the autobiography tells “the beginning of their assembling together”²⁵ by recounting some of the origins of how the disparate colonies became an independent political public. The autobiography even recounts “who taught the story to the teller”²⁶ when it describes Franklin “obtaining any little Anecdote of my Ancestors,”²⁷ referencing how he himself came to know the familial/collective history he is reporting on. The autobiography can be read through this lens as Nancy’s origin myth because it imagines a readership which shares the author’s ancestral history.

Americans’ common origin myths and shared historical narratives contribute to their sense of identity. Through a large historical survey analyzed in their book *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen study what they designate “popular historymaking,”²⁸ or the practice they identify in America of studying and spreading popular understandings of history. These histories help people identify themselves with their communities. For example, one American connects learning about one’s genealogy to developing a sense of self.²⁹ Rosenzweig and Thelen acknowledge that there are likely significant differences between how Americans think about and use their history in different time

²⁴ Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Myth interrupted." *The inoperative community* 520 (1991), 43.

²⁵ Nancy, 44.

²⁶ Nancy, 44.

²⁷ Franklin, 3.

²⁸ Rosenzweig, Roy, and David Paul Thelen. *The presence of the past: Popular uses of history in American life*. Vol. 2. Columbia University Press, 1998, 3.

²⁹ Rosenzweig and Thelen, 15.

periods, but for this project's purpose the overarching sociological claims of the study are less important than the ways that the types of popular historymaking common among Americans are highly reflective of how this project reads Franklin's autobiography. For instance, the survey showed that Americans "put great trust in relatives"³⁰ when it comes to reconstructing history, and Franklin frames his autobiography as a family history. For many Americans surveyed, the "line blurred between 'personal' and 'national' pasts."³¹ Americans in the survey connected personal narratives to broader historical narratives that help construct a national identity. Franklin's text intertwines personal narratives with national history when it reorients its focus from a familial to a national audience.

During a break in the text's narrative, Franklin's autobiography reimagines its readership explicitly as a "Public."³² The text prints a letter written by Franklin's friend, Mr. Abel James, which introduces the idea that the autobiography's narrative holds the power to influence readers. Mr. James believes Franklin's narrative "almost insensibly leads the youth into the resolution of endeavoring to become as good and eminent as the journalist."³³ Franklin's text leads the youth into "resolution," a word that may make the reader think of "revolution" particularly as the letter comes between two separate discussions of what inspired the revolution. The letter can be read as an unsubtle hint that Franklin's text not only has the power to lead youth into an industrious lifestyle that mirrors his, but into that revolutionary spirit that helped establish the new nation. As the text progresses, the autobiography's belief in Franklin's contribution to the founding of the nation becomes clearer. In Franklin's narrative, his public

³⁰ Rosenzweig and Thelen, 21.

³¹ Rosenzweig and Thelen, 22.

³² Franklin, 70.

³³ Franklin, 71.

library projects helped inspire the public to revolution. The library narrative establishes a connection between the reading public and the origins of the first American political public.

In Franklin's narrative, his library project created conditions which made the Revolution possible. Franklin's use of text and publishing as a method of constituting a public rises to the surface of his autobiography explicitly at the onset of this first "Project of a public Nature,"³⁴ his subscription library. Franklin sees this library as the foundation of all other similar libraries in North America, calling it their "Mother."³⁵ Franklin, notably, uses a genealogical metaphor. Franklin remarks that these libraries "have improv'd the general Conversation of the Americans, made the common Tradesmen & Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in the Defense of their Privileges." Conversation is, in Franklin's understanding, central to constituting a public. Later, Warner's analysis of discourse will help this project understand how such conversation contributes to the founding of a public. The "quality" of those conversations inspired the gestating American public to take a "Stand." Franklin believes the intelligence spread by the library system has contributed to this "Stand" in defense of the colonies' "Privileges." Franklin traces the origins of revolutionary political discourse to the literary exposure facilitated by his library. The revolution was possible, in this narrative, because of the libraries.

Franklin's first mention of his library project comes just before the "break" where Abel James's letter is published, and the second comes just after. This repetition ostensibly occurs because the author is not sure whether he has already informed the reader how he established the

³⁴ Franklin, 69.

³⁵ Franklin, 69.

library.³⁶ He tells us that the second account “may be struck out if found to have been already given.”³⁷ Clearly either Franklin, or his publishers after his death, could have read back and realized that this account was already given, but both accounts remain, framing the published letters. The effect is that the story of the library occurs both directly before and directly after the “break” in the narrative. Franklin tells us that “The Affairs of the Revolution occasion’d the interruption.”³⁸ The library narratives textually frame the moment of the revolution. After the Revolution’s interruption, the letters of his friends have convinced Franklin to write a text “intended for the Public.”³⁹ Just as the library was Franklin’s first project of a “public Nature”⁴⁰ it is the first story he tells (or retells) in the public-facing section of his autobiography. The library not only frames the Revolution, but the moment where Franklin becomes public. The Revolution and the autobiography’s turn towards the public are placed together, connecting Franklin’s public project with the creation of the American political public. The establishment of the first library itself reflects the project of establishing a public.

In the second account, the library project explicitly prepares colonists to become an independent political public. Franklin feels compelled to start a subscription library service in Philadelphia because there were no good booksellers south of Boston and “those who lov’d Reading were oblig’d to send for their books from England.”⁴¹ Franklin bemoans a reliance on England for published texts which reflects an overall rejection of this reliance in the revolutionary moment. His service helps mitigate this reliance by providing an alternate source of published texts. Through the subscription service, Franklin was able to create an exceptional

³⁶ Franklin, 77.

³⁷ Franklin, 77.

³⁸ Franklin, 70.

³⁹ Franklin, 70.

⁴⁰ Franklin, 69.

⁴¹ Franklin, 77.

class of readers, “better instructed & more intelligent People of the same rank generally are in other Countries.”⁴² This boast insists that American workers are a particularly skilled readership and that the libraries helped make them so. The people who became such skilled readers were “mostly Young Tradesmen.”⁴³ Franklin was focused on turning this industrious middle class into a fully participating reading public, as intelligent and well-read as European aristocrats, and his process of establishing his first libraries reflect such a participatory political process.

In describing how his original library system came to be, Franklin discusses the Articles of Association which all library members signed as the terms of using their collective resource. Franklin writes that the Articles of Association were “meant to be binding on us” and “our Heirs.”⁴⁴ Franklin and his cohorts not only committed themselves to an agreement of paying into a common system for mutual benefit, they imagined passing that system down to their ancestors. Many did survive to see the end of the system however, as “the Instrument was after a few Years rendered null by a Charter that incorporated & gave perpetuity to the Company.”⁴⁵ Thus the permanence hoped for in the founding articles was achieved in the Charter. This incorporation reflects what happened to the nation as it transitioned from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution. The independent states were tied together by a “Charter” which furthermore gave the federation “Perpetuity” by bringing together the loose union of states under a stronger central government.

The transition from Articles to Charter creates an institution that extends infinitely and has the authority to speak with the voice of all its members. The “Perpetuity” of the new system is emphasized which reflects the Constitution’s emphasis on securing liberties for “our

⁴² Franklin, 78.

⁴³ Franklin, 78.

⁴⁴ Franklin, 78.

⁴⁵ Franklin, 78.

Posterity.” The inheritance of both the cost of maintaining the system and the benefit of the common resource is made eternal under the new Charter. The Articles of Association contain a “We” at the outset of the document, which reads “We, whose names are hereunto subscribed.”⁴⁶ The collective voice which the Articles speak with only includes current members who have signed the document. The Charter also lists its current members but includes “such other persons as shall hereafter be admitted or become members of the *Library Company of Philadelphia*.”⁴⁷ The new charter accounts for new members to become a part of the collective, and creates a situation where the company can not only grow but can perpetuate infinitely. The Library Company of Philadelphia remains in operation today. The Charter also grants the institutions the power to act with the authority of its collective members. The Charter declares the members of the company to be “One body corporate and politics in deed.”⁴⁸ The text, once consented to by the members, has the power to speak and act with a collective voice. This speaking with the authority of a collective voice informs this project’s reading of the Constitution in the next chapter.

It is necessary to acknowledge, before moving on, something that goes conspicuously unacknowledged in Franklin’s autobiography: the Post Office. Despite being the first Postmaster General of the United States (if only briefly), Franklin excludes talk of the Post Office or the colonial post system he helped establish from his autobiography. For him, it seems the reading made possible by Library services was the central aspect of creating a public. Yet the exchange of letters made possible by the Post Office emerges as important at least in Franklin’s own correspondence with his friends. He publishes two letters in the place where he reorients the

⁴⁶ The Articles of Association of the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1731.

<http://www.librarycompany.org/about/Am1869PhiLibCom-18283-O-9-Articles.pdf>

⁴⁷ The Charter of The Library Company of Philadelphia, <http://www.librarycompany.org/about/1770-%20The%20charter.%20laws.%20and%20catalogue.pdf> 23

⁴⁸ The Charter of The Library Company of Philadelphia, 23.

autobiography to have a public readership, the letters that seem to have convinced him to do so. So even if the text is strangely silent on the Post Office as an institution, letters are structural to it.

For Franklin, the library is clearly the public institution most closely connected with the origins of the people. In discussing the beginning of his library project Franklin exemplifies a collective being which is helpful for understanding the “We” these documents of unification employ. This “We” imagines a collective which the texts also help to produce. Whether it’s a library charter or a national Constitution, it is possible to read the formation of a public in how Franklin thinks about such documents. Franklin advises that it is difficult to persuade people to do things that benefit your personal interest, so when trying to promote a project it is more effective to couch one’s argument in terms of a collective one represents. When trying to sign people up for his first subscription library, Franklin talks about “the Impropriety of presenting one’s self as the Proposer of any useful Project... I therefore put myself as much as I could out of sight, and stated it as a Scheme of a *Number of Friends*.”⁴⁹ When promoting projects, Franklin obscures his self in favor of presenting it as a collective project. This being as part of a collective is not a strategy only used in the library project. Franklin says he “ever practis’d it on such Occasions.” Franklin prescribes this method of obscuring the self in a multitude when working on organizing people together for such projects. This collecting people into a subscription library is similar to the “We” of the Constitution. The framers of the Constitution are also obscuring themselves as individuals and creating a collective identity, producing a collective identity for the American public that can speak, act, ordain, and establish.

The Constitution’s “We” was clearly meant to signify not just the Constitution's framers but the “people.” The Constitution's framers present their text as having the authority not of a

⁴⁹ Franklin, 78-79.

few but of an entire collective political public. But who is meant by this people, and how the framers are able to claim this collective's authority, is not at all clear. This question necessitates a close reading of that "We" to understand how the Constitution simultaneously organizes and claims the authority of the American political public.

Chapter 2

“We the People:” The Preamble to the Constitution.

“I don’t know what most white people in this country feel, but I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions.”⁵⁰

—James Baldwin

The Constitution’s use of “We” addresses a public which does not necessarily exist prior to its being named, while simultaneously claiming the authority to speak for that public. The preamble opens, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”⁵¹ The Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation, a document which loosely tied the thirteen colonies into an alliance but left the states far more powerful than any central government. This political structure is reflected in the opening line of the Articles, which reads, “To all to whom these Presents shall come, we, the undersigned Delegates of the States affixed to our Names send greeting.”⁵² The Articles speak as a “we” as well, but instead of the “people” this “we” signifies “the undersigned Delegates of the States.” The Constitution identifies itself as the voice of the “people,” and in doing so claims to speak with authority stemming from the public itself. The Articles draw authority from representatives from each state. The Articles are therefore established by consent

⁵⁰ *I Am Not Your Negro*, directed by Raol Peck. (2016.; United States: Velvet Films).

⁵¹ U.S. Constitution, Preamble.

⁵² The Articles of Confederation. 1781. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/artconf.asp.

of the states instead of the political public en masse. This political shift from a weak central government acting by the consent of states to a stronger federal government established by the authority of the “people” itself constitutes a moment of political founding. This chapter will explore the address “We the people” and how its imagining of the political public contributes to the formation of that public.

Bonnie Honig describes the paradox inherent to such moments of political founding by saying that “the people are in the untenable position of seeking to generate as an outcome of their actions, the very general will that is supposed to motivate them to action.”⁵³ In Honig’s reading of Rousseau, the people act as a people only when they act on the general will, or the democratic will that asserts the general good. Such a general will is precisely what the Constitution’s preamble attempts to imagine. The people produce the will that also binds them together into a public. The people are imagined to act as a whole in order to strive for a greater perfection in their political union and promote the “general Welfare.” In the preamble, the people are brought into a public and act in the general will of that public simultaneously. For this to be possible, the “We” would have to have the power to draw individuals together into a political public.

Althusser’s concept of interpellation is helpful for understanding the “We” as an address which transforms individuals into political subjects. Althusser’s definition of interpellation is a “hailing” which “recruits subjects,” or ‘transforms individuals into subjects.’⁵⁴ This project reads the “We” of the Constitution as just such a hailing where the addressee is transformed into an American subject that is part of a collective “We.” Instead of Althusser’s formation of “Hey, you

⁵³ Honig, Bonnie. "Between decision and deliberation: political paradox in democratic theory." *American political science review* 101, no. 01 (2007): 5.

⁵⁴ Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader* 9, no. 1 (2006): 118.

there,⁵⁵ the Constitution uses “We” to transform the individual reader into a subject. You, the reader, are part of the “We,” so it is you who ordains and establishes the following document and the government it describes. You, the reader, do this as a member of a political public which this text names the “people.” In contrast, the Articles of Confederation are specifically addressed to “all to whom these Presents shall come.” Readers are not themselves imagined to be part of this moment of political founding, but are rather sent “greetings” by delegates who have already performed the founding. The Constitution’s “We,” on the other hand, signifies the reader as part of the public along with the Constitutional framers. For Althusser, however, the subject is “always-already interpellated individuals as subjects.”⁵⁶ Before ever seeing the Constitution, the reader is already interpellated as a subject into the public. This project must deal with the paradox of an address which produces a subject before that subject is directly addressed.

To resolve this “chicken-and-egg”⁵⁷ paradox, Honig conceptualizes the formation of the people as an infinite process. Honig’s concept of the infinite suggests an understanding of the public as an “ever-changing and infinitely sequential people.”⁵⁸ Honig suggests we need to widen our understanding of how publics are established from particular moments to an ever-changing narrative. Publics, therefore, do not emerge from nothing, summoned from the abyss by a politically founding address, but rather develop out of already-existent political structures and communities which seem, in moments of founding such as the Constitution, to be reorganized or unified. Warner is equally skeptical of the concept of a discernable moment of political origin.

⁵⁵ Althusser, 118.

⁵⁶ Althusser, 119.

⁵⁷ Honig, 2.

⁵⁸ Honig, 15.

In *The Letters of the Republic*, Warner questions how a legal order can validate itself in the American founding. He is critical of narratives in which a people, by their legitimizing consent, bring a rule of law into being. Rather, he reads that establishing act as an attempt by law to legalize itself by claiming the authority of the people. The people do not gather together to unanimously grant their consent, the Constitution legitimizes itself by claiming their authority. As an example. Warner questions the authority of the Assembly to represent the authority of the people in establishing new law, because the authority of the Assembly was theoretically voided by the sovereignty of the people.⁵⁹ The American founding was an attempt to both upend continuity by establishing the sovereignty of the people and maintain continuity in the rule of law. It seems impossible to claim to represent the will of the people before representational procedures are established. Yet, it is necessary to claim the authority of the people in order to legitimately establish new representational procedures. The Assembly, like the Constitution, must claim to already hold this representational authority in order to legitimize the institutions being established. The “people” is never anything that exists physically, but a signifier meant to indicate representational legitimacy, a legitimacy that must be assumed in order to have the authority to establish. That “We” necessarily assumes the reader’s, and the people’s participation and consent when it ordains and establishes the Constitution.

To explore how an address like the Constitution’s “We” can establish a public it is helpful to understand more broadly how language performs actions. J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* explores how linguistic utterances can perform action in the world. Austin distinguishes between the locutionary, “an act *of* saying something,” the illocutionary, “an act *in* saying something”, and the perlocutionary or what is done by saying something, or the

⁵⁹ Warner, *Letters*.

“consequences.”⁶⁰ The preamble’s locutionary act is the utterance itself. The illocutionary act is somewhat more complicated. In making this statement, the preamble “establishes and ordains” the Constitution itself. Specifically it declares that “We, the people,” perform this action. Thus it claims that there is such a thing as a “people” which can perform actions. By saying that the people do this, the preamble asserts that the “people” exist while simultaneously having the people perform an action. Whether the action is performed is determined by whether the Constitution can successfully claim the authority of the people. For Austin, this would mean that the act succeed when it fulfills “the appropriate circumstances.”⁶¹ Particular conditions must be met for the preamble’s address to have real power.

In discussing the conditions necessary to the “We” having its desired effect, it is necessary to include a particular response from listeners as one condition of an effective statement. Austin notes that one of the conditions to a statement having the intended effect, or being “happy,”⁶² is that “a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings”⁶³ intended by the statement. In addition, all participants must feel that the statement had a particular effect in order for the illocutionary action to be “happy.” This relates to Austin’s idea of the perlocutionary, where the statement has a consequence. For instance, he uses the example of the illocution “He urged...me to shoot her” vs the perlocution “He persuaded me to shoot her.”⁶⁴ The “urging” can be performed just in the saying, but “persuasion” cannot occur without a particular feeling being invoked in the listener or, in this case, reader. In exploring the conditions necessary for the preamble to be “happy,” it is important to keep in mind that reader response is equally important.

⁶⁰ Austin, John Langshaw. *How to do things with words*. Oxford university press, 1975.

⁶¹ Austin, 13.

⁶² Austin, 14.

⁶³ Austin, 15.

⁶⁴ Austin, 101.

For Austin, the effectiveness of all speech hinges on particular conditions. Austin provides examples of statements which are void if “one or another of these conditions is not satisfied.”⁶⁵ One such example is a ceremony to name a ship. If Austin decided to intervene in such a ceremony and name the ship himself, he could go through all the motions of the naming but “the trouble is, I was not the person chosen to name it.”⁶⁶ Austin uses this example to show that simply saying particular words does not necessarily perform an action but that certain conditions must be met or else the “‘action’ was ‘void’ or ‘without effect.’”⁶⁷ One must, for instance, be the person chosen to say those particular words. Any actual effect of words is conditional upon a certain set of circumstances being met such that participants understand that the action has taken place.

Conditions must be such that when an American reads the preamble of the Constitution they imagine themselves to be part of the “people.” In Austin’s example of naming the ship, one important condition is who speaks the utterance. The “We” is being uttered by the “people” itself, or at least that is the conceit in the text. Of course such a collective utterance is only possible in a written utterance, as the individuals comprising the people cannot physically speak with one voice. Reading is therefore a necessary condition of this utterance. The utterance also needs the consent of the people in order to speak with their authority. In order for the utterance to be “happy,” readers must feel themselves to be part of the “people” so they can consent. Because the reader is imagined to be a member of the public, the reader must consent to the establishing and ordaining taking place in order for the Constitution to have the authority to speak as the “people.” This consenting reader provides the Constitution with the legitimacy of the consent of

⁶⁵ Austin, 22.

⁶⁶ Austin, 23.

⁶⁷ Austin, 23.

the people, which is central to a democratic idea of a republic and to legitimate government.⁶⁸ In Austin's words "part of the procedure is getting oneself appointed."⁶⁹ This appointment is the consent the people give to the Constitution. In order to consent as a member of the "people," the reader must be able to imagine that they are in fact a member of that "people." The reading has real power as a performative act because the reader, the person who in Austin's formulation would be hearing the utterance, accepts that the action is performed. Readers can accept this only when they can imagine themselves as members of the political public.

This project utilizes a definition of political "imagining," that stems from Benedict Anderson, is used by Jason Frank, and signifies a political public's ability to conceptualize themselves as individual members of a collective political society. Frank utilizes "imagination" to mean a specifically eighteenth century role for imagination in political theory which "was essential not only to the conceptualization of self...but also to establishing the sympathetic relationships that formed the basis of society and economic and political orders."⁷⁰ In the eighteenth century, Frank argues, society is structured around people's ability to imagine themselves as part of a collective. It's this ability to imagine which produces the political and economic orders which make up society. Both Frank and this project draw part of their definition of "imagination" from Anderson's thinking on imagination as the necessary factor in nation-building. In his *Imagined Communities*, Anderson in fact defines the nation as "an imagined political community" explaining that members of the nation "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of

⁶⁸ Arendt, Hannah. *On revolution*. Penguin, 1990, 70.

⁶⁹ Austin, 24.

⁷⁰ Frank, Jason. "Publius and Political imagination." *Political Theory* 37, no. 1 (2009): 76.

their communion.”⁷¹ Frank uses Anderson’s definition and reads the Federalists addressing the nation as Anderson’s imagined community and as “a captivating object of aesthetic evaluation.”⁷² Mutual interaction with aesthetic object such as printed texts is central to Frank’s understanding of political imagining. An imagining of the national community, therefore, will involve an aesthetic object such as the Constitution or, a little later, Franklin’s autobiography. For Frank, the *Federalist Papers* operates as such an aesthetic object to imagine the public.

In “Publius and Political Imagination” Frank theorizes how the writing of Publius, the pseudonym representing the three authors of the *Federalist Papers* (John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison) employs imagination in order to form the new republic. Frank argues that imagination was a necessary part of this founding. He emphasizes that the objective of these authors was to “establish a free government from popular ‘reflection and choice’ rather than ‘accident and force.’”⁷³ The Federalists wrote intentionally to produce the political public they wanted. The pseudonym the Federalist write under, “Publius,” draws attention to the public this pseudonym is meant to address. Frank points out that the persona was “rhetorically constructed to elicit and represent a national American public.”⁷⁴ The pseudonym itself was meant to reify the concept of an American public which can speak, and a representative to speak for them. As Warner points out, Publius was named after Publius Valerianus, a Roman consul and lawgiver. Publius is simultaneously identified with the public and law-giving, an intersection at the core of the American founding.⁷⁵ A public, for Michael Warner is “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.”⁷⁶ Publius, by creating a discourse about the

⁷¹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books, 2006: 6.

⁷² Frank, *Publius* 86.

⁷³ Frank, *Publius*, 70.

⁷⁴ Frank, *Publius* 71.

⁷⁵ Warner, 113.

⁷⁶ Warner, 67.

nation and national identity, organized the very public capable of having that discourse.

Franklin's belief in the power of good conversation to establish a political public relates to this conception of the power of discourse. The discourse is not possible without the public, and the public is not possible without the discourse. For Warner, the public "exists *by virtue of being addressed*."⁷⁷ Frank reads Publius as a fictitious character created to address an American public that he also creates through his address. The discourse that Publius creates through his address is a necessary condition for the people of early America to be able to imagine an American public. Publius's address helped to produce a public the same way the "We" of the Constitution. This address makes being a public imaginable for Americans. Imagination is necessary for people understanding themselves as public because "imagination was construed as the very basis of individual and collective identity."⁷⁸ For Frank, certain conditions must be met such that the reading produces the desired imagining.

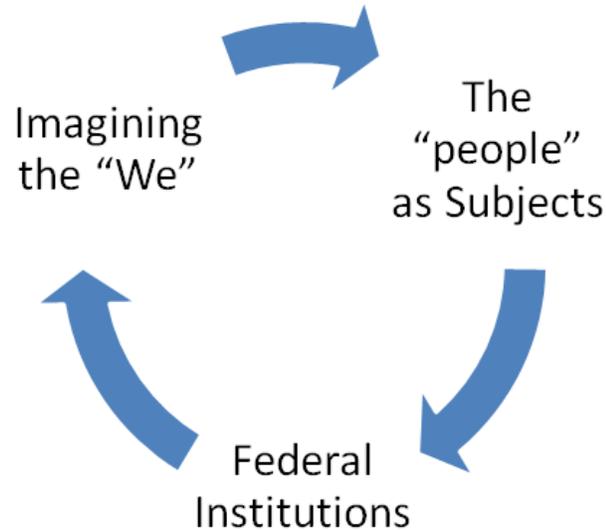
Frank argues that veneration of institutions was a necessary condition of the public. Frank discusses the "indirect coaxing and canalizing of the public imagination encouraged through institutional design"⁷⁹ of the Federalists. He outlines how institutional procedures are central to the production of the national public and the legitimate representation of the people by the federal government because they make such a government imaginable to the people. For Frank, they are also necessary for a stable imagining by the people of themselves as public. Institutional power must be redirected away from state administration and towards federal administrative bodies in order for the people to have a stable imagination of themselves as constituents of that federal government. Those institutions must handle the needs of the people and be real forces of power in their lives in order to have a stable political imagination.

⁷⁷ Warner, 67.

⁷⁸ Frank, *Publius*, 76.

⁷⁹ Frank, *Publius*, 77.

The cycle of imagination, institutional foundation, and subjection at the heart of the founding of the American Federal government operated something like this:



The institutions and procedures of the federal government allowed the people to imagine themselves as a national public, a “We.” Once the people imagined themselves as a public it became possible for them to imagine themselves as subjects to the federal government. As subjects, they can imagine this government represents them and grant their consent. This consent grants the government the authority to act as the legitimate state, including exercising power through public institutions. These powers which institutions exercise in the lives of the people allow them to imagine themselves as subjects, and so on.

Franklin’s library exemplifies this institutional establishment of the American people. Each member had equal access to the library because they all contributed to its upkeep. Their consent and support allowed the institution to survive, and the services of the institution drew them together as a collective. As last chapter explored, Franklin connects the library to the

establishment of a much wider collective, the American political public. His original, smaller institution only had so many members from a particular class of Philadelphians. As the libraries spread across the colonies, however, they were able to draw together a much wider public through the readings they facilitates. A national consciousness, one that could construct the new nation, emerged from that public.

Publius redirects attachment towards the federal government, allowing the people to imagine themselves as part of a national community which is the public.⁸⁰ Frank argues that *The Federalist Papers* draws readers into a national body politic by addressing them as a “national citizenry”⁸¹ rather than as New Yorkers or Virginians. Addressing the people in this way is a similar literary technique to what Franklin’s address performs. Instead of imagining the reader to be a son, as Franklin does, Publius’s address imagines the reader to be a member of a national citizenry. The “We” of the Constitution interpellates into a public because it imagines the reader to be a member of the public, allowing the readers to imagine the same. Franklin’s fantasy of being-in-print is an example of how a text produces such an imagining.

Franklin’s text produces a literary body which can be read and consumed, and points to a way of bring-in-print in post-revolutionary print culture important not only to Franklin but the Constitutional framers. Warner explores the way Franklin presents himself as a text, and thus in posterity becomes a text to be edited, published, and read by the American people. Franklin becomes a body, not in the sense of flesh, but as a literary object. Franklin is literally a *body of work* which can be published and read. This way of being a body is essential to Franklin’s project, not only for his legacy, which will extend hundreds of years past his death, but for his project of allowing himself to be read. If Franklin is a body of literature, of publishable and

⁸⁰ Frank, *Publius* 86.

⁸¹ Frank, *Publius* 86.

published works, then Americans across the country can hold an American in their hands. They can read an American and through this reading being American themselves becomes imaginable. Franklin was far from the only publishable life to which the revolutionary-era American readership was exposed.

Publius speaks with same type of collective voice as the Constitution. The *Federalist Papers* were, of course, actually written by three men who signed their essays defending the Constitution with the pseudonym “Publius.” Instead of signing as themselves, tying their identities as individual lives to the work, the writers took on the identity of “the public.” Publius is a collective as opposed to an individual identity, not only signifying the collective of the Federalists but which attempts to signify the broader public. One purpose of the *Federalist Papers* was in fact to argue for a particular understanding of the nation and this very public which Publius sought to signify in his (their?) writing. Publius argued for a strong, unifying central government that would bond together the disparate state governments and disparate communities across the former colonies. To make this union possible, these bonds between the various groups of people who would become known as Americans had to be imaginable to them. Publius’s body of work attempts to make this government, and by extension this public of Americans, imaginable to his readership. This public is precisely what Americans must imagine when they read the “We” in order to legitimize the government which the Constitution seeks to establish.

Part 1 Conclusion:

The texts which this project reads from the post-revolutionary period produce a fantasy of being-in-print of the American people which allowed readers to imagine not only that a “people” exists, but that they are part of such a people. Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography reveals a way that this imagining is made possible first through imagining a common history for its readership. It then imagines a common being as subjects of public institutions which draw readers together into a space of common discourse and reading. This original concept of the people, and their ability to imagine that people, rests on their collective understanding of their origins. It was also made possibly by their collective experience as subjects of the federal government, an experience made real to them by the effect federal institutions had on their lives. Franklin’s example is the library, but in the beginning of America’s history there was another institution providing services throughout the nation: the Post Office.

The Crying of Lot 49 produces an alternative imagining of the history and present of the Post Office that opens the possibility for new interpretations of the political public. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* demonstrates a reimagining that was being attempted in the same historical moment as *Lot 49*. The political place of black Americans in society was uncertain. Would there be segregation or integration? Would black Americans continue to face sweeping disenfranchisement in many states? These problems hinge on the ability to imagine the American people a particular way which in turn hinges on particular narratives of the history of that people. If you want to change the people, you have to change how they imagine themselves. This imagining is tied, seemingly, to the public’s understanding of their history and their relationship with institutions. This project now turns to texts which reimagine both.

Part 2: 1965

Towards the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa, desperate for information about an obscure Jacobean revenge tragedy, asks a noted scholar to tell her something “historical” about the author and the work. He responds, “Pick some words...Them, we can talk about.”⁸² A novel full of conspiracies and fringe historical theories, *The Crying of Lot 49* is deeply skeptical of clear historical narratives and how “true” they are. The novel is constantly throwing mainstream historical narratives into question by offering alternatives which may or may not themselves be true. For instance, Tryster, the postal conspiracy at the heart of the novel, questions the very origins and development of postal service in the United States. The novel attempts to destabilize how readers are thinking about the nation’s history, which seems to have some effect on how characters are thinking of themselves in relation to the nation. This questioning historical narratives was not an isolated incident in *The Crying of Lot 49* but permeated many of major the political issues of 1965.

The problem of imagining the people lingers generations after the first Americans, who left only printed texts from which contemporary readers can attempt to draw an understanding of this imagining. It seems difficult to believe that modern Americans reading “We” in the Constitution imagine the same “We” as a reader in the 1790s considering the totally different demographics and historical contexts. In particular, by 1965 many Americans were attempting to come to terms with the long history of racism and oppression structured into the legal framework of American life since the days of slavery. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was, in a way, an attempt to institutionally reimagine the people. For the first time, a legal framework would be established which acknowledged the particular barrier to representation facing particular marginalized groups, black Americans in the South. This legal framework attempted to account

⁸² Pynchon, 124.

for the historical reasons these communities had been being particularly vulnerable to disenfranchisement. This attempt to produce alternative historical narratives simultaneously appeared in literature. This project's 1965 texts, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* destabilize traditional imaginings of the people and paint a public debate over who is signified by "We."

Chapter 3

“The Legacy was America:”⁸³ *The Crying of Lot 49*

“...post offices are often the heart and soul of their community.”⁸⁴

—Senator Bernie Sanders

The 2006 Harper Perennial edition of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* seems surprisingly riddled with errata. For instance, the text at one point misspells the protagonist’s name. Oedipa is written “Odeipa.”⁸⁵ Many published novels contain errata, and it’s not unheard of for later editions not to fix them. But some errata in this text draw the eye. For instance, in the scene in *Lot 49* where Bortz shows Oedipa illustrations from a version of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, Bortz, while describing a slide, says “You get the general idea. notice how often the figure of Death hovers in the background.”⁸⁶ There is an extra space after the end of the first sentence and the n in “notice” is lower case when it should be upper case. The erratum is particularly noticeable as the mistake comes on the word “notice.” Furthermore, the erratum comes in the midst of a long discussion about different editions of a text and how a particular line is written in a variety of different versions. In another moment, the phrase “to see if he’d known” is written incorrectly as “to see it he’d known.”⁸⁷ This switch from an f to a t comes in the middle of a paragraph that begins with Oedipa wondering if a cross is actually the initial T which draws

⁸³ Pynchon, 147.

⁸⁴ Sanders, Bernie. “Save the Postal Service.” POLITICO
http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0312/73508_Page2.html#comments

⁸⁵ Pynchon, 82.

⁸⁶ Pynchon, 127.

⁸⁷ Pynchon, 71.

further attention to the misplaced “t.” The new phrase reads “see it.” Errata include “notice,” “see it,” and glaring misspelling of the main character’s name. The pattern draws unusual attention to the novel’s errata. When Franklin’s text draws attention to his “Errata,” (there a metaphor for his life’s mistakes), it signaled that the text would present a particular narrative of Franklin’s life and hinted that the text’s first goal would not be historical accuracy. *Lot 49* is a novel, so we know as readers it won’t adhere to historical accuracy. Another errata, however, signals the possibility of an even deeper fiction in the novel’s narrative of its own publishing.

The strangest erratum in the novel may be the copyright date itself. The date includes a confusion, although it's not clear that it's a mere publishing error. The 2006 edition reads “1965, 1966” and a line at the top of the page reads “A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1965 by J.B. Lippincott Company.” This seems to be untrue. The J.B. Lippincott Company edition, the first edition, was published in 1966. Its publication date reads “1966, 1965.” *Esquire Magazine* published an excerpt from the novel titled “The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity” in December 1965, which has possibly caused the confusion that led to this misleading copyright page. This claim made by the 2006 edition as to when the first hardcover was published seems to itself be an erratum, an erratum which produces an alternative narrative of the publishing history of the novel itself. Readers of *Lot 49* are faced with a text that holds within itself alternative narratives of its own publication. The edition this project works with incorrectly places the physical existence of the novel in 1965, thus choosing to interpret the events of this historical confusion a particular way. *Lot 49* constantly reimagines history: the history of the country where it was published, the history of that country’s institutions, and even the history of its own publishing, in the text of its bureaucratic details.

Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, American history is reimagined. The Post Office is a particular focus of this reimagining as characters in the novel postulate the existence, or at least introduce the possibility, of an underground, decentralized, monopoly-busting competitor to the federal Post Office which is at various times either referred to as Trystero, Tristero, or W.A.S.T.E. As the novel's protagonist, Oedipa, slowly unveils what appears to be a several hundred years-old conspiracy to hide the existence of Trystero, and the true origins of the current postal monopoly of the United States federal government, she comes across a network of secretive citizens who, through their use of the system, withdraw from the republic. Within the novel, reimagining a people's relationship to institutions also reimagines that people. As Thomas Hill Schaub puts it, Oedipa "seems to stumble across (or produce) alternative, possibly subversive energies on the threshold of making a difference in the consensus culture of the United States."⁸⁸ This chapter studies some of those alternative histories and the possibilities they produce in political imagination.

One of the novel's first examples of an alternative historical narrative is told by a character who attempts to use his narrative to reimagine America's foreign relations. Oedipa hears this narrative just before her first encounter with W.A.S.T.E., when she meets Mike Fallopian of the Peter Pinguid Society. Fallopian tells Oedipa the story of Peter Pinguid, his group's namesake. Fallopian's narrative blends obscure historical facts and fabrication⁸⁹ and stretches back into the origins of the Cold War. He describes a military conflict between the Russian Navy and Confederate ships, calling it "the first military confrontation between Russia and America" and argues that "the ripples...spread, and grew, and today engulf us all."⁹⁰ This is a

⁸⁸ Schaub, Thomas Hill. "The Crying of Lot 49 and other California novels." *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2012): 30.

⁸⁹ Even, Martin Paul. *Historical Sources for Thomas Pynchon's 'Peter Pinguid Society'*. Pynchon Notes, 2009.

⁹⁰ Pynchon, 36.

strange interpretation of these historical events. Russia was allied with the Union, the enduring government of the United States, and came into conflict with the Confederacy, a rebellious government that no longer exists. Russia, therefore, wasn't actually in conflict with the current U.S. government but with the defunct Confederate government. Mainstream historical narratives do not, of course, consider this the beginning of the Cold War, but this narrative supports Fallopian's goals as a far right-wing activist. Fallopian wants to centralize the historical importance of his group's mostly forgotten namesake, and as a staunch anti-Communist wants to establish the history of the Cold War far back in the nation's history. Alternate historical narratives have an agenda in *Lot 49*, and the plethora of possible alternatives creates an aura of uncertainty throughout the novel.

The destabilization performed by alternative historical narratives in the novel is reflected in the uncertainty over the actual plot events of the novel itself. As historical events become more uncertain, events in the plot of the novel become fuzzy and what actually transpires is, at times, made intentionally unclear. When Metzger and Oedipa end up at the bar where they meet Fallopian, for instance, the narrative reports that "It may have been the same evening"⁹¹ as the events described prior. This uncertainty has serious implications for the reader's relationship with the narrator. Not only unreliable, the narrator is uncertain and does not seem to be sure what happened. The history, the course of events the narrator is conveying, is left unclear and the reader cannot even be certain whether the narrator is intentionally obscuring the course of events or legitimately unsure. This throws the "accuracy" of novel's course of events into doubt. The actual plot of the novel is uncertain in the same way broad historical narratives become uncertain. Just as the narrator cannot with certainty report on events, there is no narrative arbiter able to determine the veracity of Fallopian's or any other narrative. Fallopian may be sure about

⁹¹ Pynchon, 33.

his history, but the text itself will always present a lack of surety. This is true for the postal conspiracy at the core of *Lot 49*. Oedipa debates internally whether the postal conspiracy she is unravelling could possibly be a historical fact or if, perhaps, it's a "practical joke" or something she is "hallucinating."⁹² The power of historical narratives becomes clearer in the novel's thinking on memory.

Memory is a particular way of recalling how history unfolded, and, similar to the historical narratives this project traces in *Lot 49*, memory has the power to reconstruct the world. When Oedipa first meets Cohen he is drinking from a bottle of homemade dandelion wine. He had picked the dandelions from a since-destroyed cemetery and comments that each spring, at the same time living dandelions are blooming, "the wine goes through a fermentation. As if they remembered."⁹³ The dead dandelions seem to remember being alive, and this memory causes their fermentation. Memory is presented as an active force in the world that can have physical effects. Oedipa, however, goes further. For her, the fermentation is not just a sign of memory but in fact it is "As if their home cemetery in some way still did exist, in a land where you could somehow walk...As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine."⁹⁴ Memory has the power not just to recall the past but to raise the dead. Memory, for Oedipa, creates, or recreates, worlds. Specifically, a land is remembered, the land the dandelions belonged to before it was paved to make highways. Memory reconstructs that earlier world.

This remembrance of a destroyed landscape highlights the intersection of memory and mourning in the novel, which is made clearer as Oedipa mourns Driblette. Oedipa sits on his grave praying that some "coded tenacity of protein might improbably have held on six feet

⁹² Pynchon, 141.

⁹³ Pynchon, 79.

⁹⁴ Pynchon, 79.

below,” and asks it, “If you come to me...bring your memories of the last night.”⁹⁵ Oedipa prays to her idea of a memory that she imagines exists in the ground, enduring in Driblette’s decomposing remains. Memory, as historical narrative, holds a particular power to reshape the world.

These ideas of the power of memory and the lingering dead are reminiscent of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.” It is not surprising to find Freudian themes woven into the novel because the text itself points readers towards a consideration of Freud through Dr. Hilarius. Hilarius refers to himself as a “Freudian”⁹⁶ and even Oedipa’s name recalls Freud’s “Oedipus complex.” *Lot 49* explores mourning and melancholy in Freud’s sense, but emphasizes the possibilities opened by mourning over the damage it does. For Freud, Mourning is “regularly the reaction of the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an idea, and so on.”⁹⁷ In Freud’s mourning, the mourner experiences loss and pain at that loss but usually comes to accept the loss and reinvests libidinal energy into a new loved object. This becomes damaging for Freud when the mourner cannot reinvest their libidinal energy in a new loved object. The mourner sees the world as “poor and empty”⁹⁸ but for the melancholic the ego itself has become so because the libidinal energy invested into an object has been turned inwards towards the ego. In the case of the melancholic, the “shadow of the object fell upon the ego”⁹⁹ The pain suffered from the loss is incorporated into the melancholic ego.

In *Lot 49*, the persistence of the lost object in the memory of the mourner is not merely damaging, but has the power to reconstruct worlds. The lost object in the dandelion wine scene is

⁹⁵ Pynchon, 133.

⁹⁶ Pynchon, 109.

⁹⁷ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and melancholia." *The Psychoanalytic Review* (1913-1957) 11 (1924): 243.

⁹⁸ Freud, 246.

⁹⁹ Freud, 249.

land itself, land brushed aside to make space for a freeway. Yet the remnants of that loss, the dandelions, persist, fermented and preserved, in the wine. The process of fermentation preserves a corpse, transforming it but allowing it to persist. The dandelions, and the land they represent, are transformed into a loved object that lasts, the wine. This fermentation is a remembering which brings their home back into being. The text frames this restorative power positively, calling it the “home cemetery”¹⁰⁰ of the dandelions. For Oedipa, it is as if this land that only exists in the memory of wine “really [does] persist”¹⁰¹ This ability for historical narratives, for memories, to reconstruct the world happens on a larger scale in the Trystero conspiracy.

The philatelist (stamp collector) Genghis Cohen’s history of Thurn und Taxis and Trystero outlines the alternate postal history the novel offers. His narrative of the history of these two rival postal services and how they played into the history of mail service in America begins in the same scene as the dandelions. He begins by telling Oedipa about Thurn und Taxis, a German noble family which he describes as “*the* European mail service”¹⁰² from 1300 to 1867. This part of the history is based on the actual history of European mail delivery, but Cohen goes on to, based on the stamp forgery that Oedipa has brought to him, speculate about the possibility of “An 800-year tradition of postal fraud,”¹⁰³ the beginnings of the conspiratorial unraveling that will begin to reveal (or fabricate) the existence of Trystero to Oedipa. Actual historical facts and paranoid conspiratorial speculation begin to intermingle in a way not unlike Fallopian’s account of the story of Peter Pinguid. Oedipa is later able to piece together what may be a more complete history of Thurn und Taxis and its secretive enemy, which may be either Tristero or Trystero, based on a series of esoteric texts such as an account from a survivor of a Trystero attack and “an

¹⁰⁰ Pynchon, 79.

¹⁰¹ Pynchon, 79.

¹⁰² Pynchon, 77.

¹⁰³ Pynchon, 79.

80-year-old pamphlet on the roots of modern anarchism.”¹⁰⁴ The account she is able to construct is of a hundreds-year-old European struggle between the dominant postal force, Thurn und Taxis, and its underground enemy, Trystero, a struggle which continues on American soil into the 19th century and, as evidenced by the stamp Cohen receives from a friend designated “Tristero Rapid Post, San Francisco, California,”¹⁰⁵ possibly into the present day. This narrative of the history of Trystero produces a retelling of the history of postal service in America where the U.S. Postal Service may not only be the victim of a hundreds-year-old tradition of postal fraud but also, throughout its existence, have faced a secret underground competitor undermining the very nature of the institution’s supposed monopoly on postal services. Or, if not, Oedipa is merely delusional, or being tricked, or just wrong, all of which the novel leaves open as possibilities.

It doesn’t seem important for the novel if Oedipa’s conspiracy is true or not. Narratives in *Lot 49* can hold real power whether or not they are “fantasies.” When Oedipa tells Hilarius that she had come to him so that he could “talk [her] out of a fantasy” he insists that she “don’t let the Freudians coax it away.”¹⁰⁶ Fantasies, like lingering memories, are not necessarily harmful shadows in *Lot 49*, and carry the power to change the world.

Oedipa’s uncovering of the Tristero conspiracy is framed as a memory, implying that this historical narrative has the same power as a memory. The night of wandering which leads her to realizations about Tristero begins with her thinking that “*She was meant to remember.*”¹⁰⁷ Oedipa’s night of wandering will be a remembering, a recalling of a history she has known but,

¹⁰⁴ Pynchon, 131.

¹⁰⁵ Pynchon, 139.

¹⁰⁶ Pynchon, 113.

¹⁰⁷ Pynchon, 95.

maybe, has forgotten. The historical narratives she remembers will therefore have the same power to reconstruct the world as the wine that recalls how the land once was.

As the long history of the possible underground alternative postal service is revealed (or invented), Oedipa comes across numerous individuals and groups living an alternative life to the typical American citizen. These people withdraw from typical American life and Oedipa, through her remembering, begins to imagine an alternative way of being an American. Pynchon scholar David Cowart calls Tristero “a metaphor serving the vision of a different social reality.”¹⁰⁸ This alternative social reality is slowly revealed to, or remembered by, Oedipa over the course of her wanderings. She sees one W.A.S.T.E. user whom she thinks of as “A child roaming the night who missed the death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of community.”¹⁰⁹ The child can recall something that no one should be able to remember, time before birth. This remembering allows the child able to think about a time of existing outside the community. The community is characterized as a comparable “blankness.” This space of death before birth is offered as an alternative to community, one that can be occupied by the “outcasts,” those whom community rejects. For Oedipa, this W.A.S.T.E. user is able remembering something impossible and in doing so imagine an alternative being outside of community.

Another W.A.S.T.E. user utilizes miscarriage, the prevention of birth, as a way to disrupt the American political community. Oedipa notices a woman “who kept going through rituals of miscarriage...dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum.”¹¹⁰ “Interregnum” is an antiquated word typically used to describe a period of time when normal government rule is

¹⁰⁸ Cowart

¹⁰⁹ Pynchon, 100.

¹¹⁰ Pynchon, 100.

suspended, or the authority exercised during that suspension of government.¹¹¹ If the normal ritual of birth is part of the continuity of the community, younger citizens born and bred to replace their elders and continue the same patterns, this woman's miscarriages are about the suspension of that continuity in favor of a vacuum. This relates to the "death before birth" missed by the child because a miscarriage is a death that actually occurs before the moment of birth, precluding entrance to community. The woman's miscarriages seem to suspend the community, or at least the governance of community.

The exchange of letters facilitated by W.A.S.T.E. allows its users to withdraw from community altogether. Oedipa sees W.A.S.T.E. users withdrawing "from the life of the Republic."¹¹² By using the term "Republic" Oedipa indicates a withdrawal from both political and social life. Oedipa goes on to speculate that these individuals "could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?)," so "there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world." It's impossible to imagine existing in true nothingness, so the child imagines blankness before birth which is similar to the community. Even the word *interregnum* implies not a pure vacuum of power but rather that some nongovernmental authority takes control temporarily. It is not a vacuum, necessarily, but a suspension of normal government, normal society. These users seem necessarily integrated into a community of some sort.

For Warner, unborn citizens are interpellated into the "We" of the Constitution from birth. Being born into the reading public of America automatically interpellates the newborn into the "We" of the Constitution because the readers of that "We" imagine the newborn to be part of the "We." This is similar to how the Althusserian subject is "always-already interpellated." *Lot 49*'s miscarriages interrupt this process by preventing the unborn child from entering the

¹¹¹ "interregnum, n." OED Online. December 2016. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98245?redirectedFrom=interregnum> (accessed January 18, 2017).

¹¹² Pynchon, 101.

community, the public sphere. Miscarriage, here an intentional miscarriage, ritually interrupts the process of the unborn coming into political citizenship. Miscarriage is symbolic of a vacuum into which Oedipa believes it is impossible for people to withdraw into. Having never come into being as citizens, the miscarried citizens can simply disappear back into a blank nothingness of death before birth. W.A.S.T.E. users, being born, embodied citizens, cannot just disappear into a vacuum (can they?); they have to establish an alternative, secret world using their own postal system, their own lines of communication, separate and hidden from the blankness of society. They cannot simply negate their existence, but must establish alternative historical narratives in order to live an alternate social existence.

Chapter 4

“A Conspiracy Down Through the Generations:”¹¹³ *The Autobiography of Malcolm*

X

“A good name is, indeed, better than gold”¹¹⁴

—Elijah Muhammed

In her foreword to the 2015 edition of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Attallah Shabazz, Malcolm’s eldest daughter, focuses on a 1999 commemorative stamp issued in honor of her father. This event, for her, paid “tribute to [Malcolm’s] immeasurable contributions on behalf of one’s innate right to self-preservation and human dignity.”¹¹⁵ Attallah calls the stamp a “glorious moment” in the remembrance of her father and says that it will be “a source of eternal pride to his children.”¹¹⁶ The stamp, for Attallah, seems to signify permanence for her father’s work and accomplishments. She says it “confirms significantly that how one lives his or her life today stands as a testament to one’s forever after.”¹¹⁷ Along with this permanence, the stamp also comes to signify the tacit approval of the U.S. Post Office and, therefore, the federal government. Ossie Davis looked on the commemorative stamp as “America’s stamp of approval” and says that with the stamp, the “radical [had] gone respectable.”¹¹⁸ Davis reads this stamp signifying the approval of the federal government and, by extension, the approval of America in general.

¹¹³ X, Malcolm. *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. Ballantine Books, 2015, 186.

¹¹⁴ Muhammad, Elijah. *The Genesis Years: Unpublished & Rare Writings of Elijah Muhammad*. 2008.

¹¹⁵ X, ix.

¹¹⁶ X, x.

¹¹⁷ X, xi.

¹¹⁸ X, xii.

Malcolm X, such a radical and often hated figure in his own time, had by 1999 become part of mainstream American history. Shabazz's introduction, the stamp proves it.

Besides being a dissident and a major Civil Rights leader, Malcolm X was a writer. His autobiography attempts to articulate a particular imagining of not only himself, by narrating his own life, but a particular imagining of black Americans by narrating that community's history. This reimagining was published during the politically fraught and cultural revolutionary moment of 1965, after Malcolm's physical body was destroyed by gunfire. Malcolm's personal history is now a federally consecrated narrative, officially approved by the U.S. government. But Malcolm intertwines his narrative with the history of a people, and that history has significant implications for the political imagining of that people.

Malcolm X's autobiography was completed and published by the journalist Alex Haley, who did the writing for the project, in 1965, the year Malcolm was assassinated. That year, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law. Meant to enforce the protection of voting rights established in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 assured that many American minorities, particularly black communities in the South, would have the ability to vote even in states that had, up to that point, systematically disenfranchised them. 1965 was a time of great reimagining in American culture and politics. Who would be represented by politicians, whose voice would be heard, was a matter of serious public debate. It was a moment charged with the potential for revolution. Into and out of this nexus of cultural and political turmoil emerged a text which bucked mainstream narratives of the history of black Americans. It presented an alternate understanding of the black American's place in society, the history of that community, and that community's future possibilities.

Malcolm X's autobiography is a text which attempts the sort of historical retelling in which *The Crying of Lot 49* is interested. A central aspect of the teachings of the Nation of Islam to which Malcolm subscribed was that the history of the human race that has been told to black people by white Christians is a false history that has robbed the black community of the truth of their noble heritage. The Nation hopes to assert an alternate historical narrative which corrects this wrong and, in doing so, change the societal status of the black communities. For instance, at one point Malcolm excitedly talks about how the Dead Sea Scrolls would "take Jesus off the stained-glass windows and the frescoes where he has been lily-white, and put Him back into the true mainstream of history where Jesus actually was non-white."¹¹⁹ Jesus has been presented as "lily-white" by white-dominated society, and Malcolm believes that the alternate historical narrative offered by the Dead Sea Scrolls can be used to refute that image of Jesus. It is notable that Malcolm calls his version of history both "true," and "mainstream." For Malcolm, white history is the aberration. He and his colleagues wanted the Nation's version of history to subsume white American narratives. These narratives have considerable political consequences for the treatment of minority communities.

Such an alternative narrative becomes necessary for Malcolm because mainstream narratives contribute to the oppression of black communities by transforming the black individual into a racialized subject. As Franz Fanon and Pierre Macherey point out, an individual is never interpellated merely as a "subject" but as a particular type of subject. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Franz Fanon explores how particular forms of racialized address, such as hate speech, interpellate the black individualize as a racialized subject.¹²⁰ Every interpellated subject is

¹¹⁹ X, 306.

¹²⁰ Macherey, Pierre. "Figures of interpellation in Althusser and Fanon." (2012).

always, according to Pierre Macherey, “a certain type of subject.”¹²¹ The black person, in Fanon’s formulation, is not merely a subject but in particular a black subject. Individuals are interpellated into particular categories contributing to the possibility of prejudice and discrimination.

Discrimination of particular racial subject categories is empowered, Fanon argues, by particular historical narratives. Fanon writes that “It is tradition to which the anti-Semites turns in order to ground the validity of their ‘point of view’...that long historical past.”¹²² The anti-Semites use that “long historical past” to validate their prejudice and weave it into society. Historical narratives, therefore, have the power to integrate prejudice in society. Subjects interpellated as “Jews” are discriminated against on the basis of these narratives. This analysis of the anti-Semite is tied to Fanon’s own experience as a black man when he recalls being told “Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.”¹²³ Even if the black person is not addressed with a racial slur, even if he is not directly addressed at all, he is still discriminated against as a part of the entrenched discrimination at work in society. The same narratives used to oppress Jewish people, for Fanon, contribute to discrimination against black subjects. For Fanon, a specifically black culture and black art offers the possibility for “salvation.”¹²⁴ He remembers “From the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing me.”¹²⁵ Fanon sees this culture as occurring outside of the “white world.” It’s separate from that world and offers a way out from white society. His use of the word “hailing” is significant as it may remind readers of Althusser’s interpellation. Here, Fanon is interpellated into a culture outside the white world. Fanon becomes not a subject of the white world but of a

¹²¹ Macherey, 18.

¹²² Fanon, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Grove press, 2008: 121

¹²³ Fanon, 122.

¹²⁴ Fanon, 123.

¹²⁵ Fanon, 123.

new black culture. This offers Fanon the ability to withdraw from mainstream culture into an alternate space in a way *Lot 49*'s W.A.S.T.E. users may appreciate. Malcolm's autobiography attempts to produce an alternate history with the power to interpellate readers into a new form of black subjectivity based on the historical nobility of the black race.

For Malcolm, the process of making the Nation's telling of history universally understood is a process of coming to understand history how it actually happened, of remembering the true history of the black race despite the lies of white society. This true history, for Malcolm, should lead to a rethinking of the nature of black Americans. He argues that "History has been so 'whitened' by the white man"¹²⁶ that even educated black Americans are fooled into believing its falsehoods. He points to the example of new historical and anthropological discoveries in Africa which are, according to him, "proving over and over again how the black man had a great, fine, sensitive civilization before the white man was out of the caves."¹²⁷ This is a reversal of what Malcolm would describe as the white telling of history, where white civilization was not only dominant but superior throughout antiquity and it was only through white refinement that primitive African cultures were "brought out of the cave." Malcolm argues these vague recent discoveries turn that history on its head and place the historical black race in the apex position of culture and refinement. The text connects this history directly to the legacy of black Americans by saying that this evidence is being uncovered "where most of America's Negroes' foreparents were kidnapped."¹²⁸ The text argues that the history of these African civilizations is the history of black Americans. Therefore, the history of that great race is the history of those Americans. For Malcolm, this narrative is not alternate history but a remembering of the historical reality.

¹²⁶ X, 184.

¹²⁷ X, 184.

¹²⁸ X, 184.

This project does not concern itself with how “true” the history that Malcolm asserts is or isn’t, or, conversely, how “true” mainstream, white-dominated historical narratives were in 1965. In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick attempts to reframe historical knowledge as not necessarily true or false, but performative. She asks readers to consider “What does knowledge *do*...*How*, in short, is knowledge performative.”¹²⁹ Sedgwick argues that although it is widely accepted that knowledge “*does* rather than simply *is*,”¹³⁰ this thinking is not widely utilized and in fact historical knowledge is usually thought of as simply true or false. This project considers history performative in a similar way to how it considers Austin’s performative nature of language. When Malcolm tries to replace the mainstream body of historical “knowledge” with a different “knowing” of how that history occurred, it is less important for this project to ask which telling is more “true.” Instead, it considers what each understanding of history performs in relation to the formation of the American political public. Mainstream history contributes to the organization of white-dominated American society. Malcolm’s history disrupts this narrative.

Malcolm’s autobiography intertwines his historical narrative of black Americans with his narrative of his personal history. In calling itself an “autobiography,” the text presents itself as Malcolm’s own story in his own words. The title “autobiography” attempts to frame the history of the text in a particular way. The “authorship” of this text is, potentially, a matter of debate. Malcolm X did not type the words of his autobiography, Haley did. The book was, in fact, finished after Malcolm’s death. This is not to deny Malcolm’s artistry or involvement in the project. Haley goes to great lengths to describe Malcolm’s hands-on involvement in the writing and editing process up until his death. The title page acknowledges Alex Haley’s role in the

¹²⁹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you." (1997), 124.

¹³⁰ Sedgwick, 124.

writing under the title, one page before the copyright page by declaring “With the assistance of Alex Haley.”¹³¹ Nonetheless, as is case with all autobiographies, Malcolm is marked as both “author” and “subject.” In emphasizing Malcolm’s contribution, the book tries to tell its own history a particular way. The text makes the decision to present a particular narrative of itself. It even describes the process of shaping the narrative of Malcolm’s life found in the book.

The autobiography describes the process of constructing particular historical narratives and explicitly acknowledges that its narrative has an agenda. The main text tells the story of how Malcolm thought that he needed to make his small organization of burglars “afraid of [him],”¹³² in order to establish his authority in the group. Malcolm leaves one bullet in the chamber of his gun, presses the gun to his head, and pulls the trigger three times. This is meant to prove that Malcolm wasn’t “afraid to die.”¹³³ It’s not until Haley’s epilogue that the reader learns that Malcolm later admitted to Haley that he had “palmed the bullet.” At first they plan to change the autobiography to reflect the truth, but then Malcolm tells Haley to “leave it that way,” meaning exclude the revision. Malcolm is worried that if people knew he was bluffing then, that’s what they would think he was “doing today, bluffing.”¹³⁴ The epilogue offers an alternate narrative from the main body of the text, and even reveals the agenda behind the decision to tell the story a particular way. The autobiography uses its historical narrative to create the desired public perception of Malcolm as someone who is still not bluffing, still not afraid to die. This reveals how the autobiography thinks about historical narratives. The text recognizes its own power to tell history in a way that performs action that changes public perception of a person and a movement. The point is not necessarily that historical accuracy is completely unimportant. After

¹³¹ X, Title Page.

¹³² X, 146.

¹³³ X, 146.

¹³⁴ X, 423.

all, Malcolm asserts that the history he tells is “true.” Nonetheless, “truth,” is here set aside to serve the autobiography’s overall project.

Complicating this, of course, is that Malcolm does not “retell” his own history in this moment. In fact, it seems that he didn’t want this secret history revealed to the reader. The epilogue is told in Haley’s voice and it’s he who provides this revelation. Of course, Haley authored the whole of the text despite the fact that it is called an “autobiography.” The very concept of an autobiography having an “epilogue” seems to challenge common understanding of the genre. It seems contradictory that a subject’s account of his own life could include something afterward, a retrospective on that life now passed because, obviously, if the subject is deceased the author is also deceased. The existence of the epilogue draws attention to an artifice inherent to the text, opening up the opportunity to critically examine the authorship of Malcolm’s autobiography. The shift to Haley’s perspective draws attention to this contradiction and allows readers to view the rest of the text as not merely an objectively true narrative of Malcolm’s life, but an intentionally constructed narrative with an agenda. The autobiography, like the historical narrative it asserts, has its motives.

Malcolm believes his alternative historical narratives have the power to change the social position of black Americans. The autobiography cites a famous anthropologist who, after finding evidence conflicting with widely accepted narratives of humanity’s origins, advocates for rewriting “completely the history of man’s origin.”¹³⁵ The teachings of Elijah Muhammad persuaded Malcolm that “the teachings of the true knowledge of ourselves would lift up the black man from the bottom of white man’s society and place the black man where he had begun, at the top of civilization.”¹³⁶ The narrative has the power to fundamentally shift the hierarchy and

¹³⁵ X, 185.

¹³⁶ X, 201.

power structure of the American people. By changing how America thinks about the historical origins of black Americans, it is possible to change that community's political status.

In order to make this shift, Malcolm's narrative has to attempt to change how Americans think about their own history. Rosenzweig and Thelen's research on popular historymaking once again offers a useful lens for thinking about the construction of private and public historical narratives, this time specifically a narrative of black Americans. The survey noted that many African Americans share a "common set of references," such as "slavery, the civil rights movement, and Martin Luther King, Jr."¹³⁷ and that these shared historical references help them build out not only a shared history as a community but a shared contemporary identity based on that history. In 1998, the shared history of slavery, civil rights, and unifying figures seem to be constructing a historical narrative which helped to give some respondents a sense of group identity. One respondent called these narratives "common history"¹³⁸ with other African Americans. This creation of a common history is precisely what Malcolm was attempting and even his name change to "X" is an attempt to assert that history into everyday life.

The changing of Malcolm Little's name to "Malcolm X" asserts his historical narrative into mainstream discourse with potentially significant political implications. Not only does the new name signify, for Malcolm, a new way of thinking about himself, it signifies an alternate way of being a citizen in America. The "X," for Malcolm, "symbolized the true African name that he could never know."¹³⁹ X acts as a stand-in, a sign acknowledging the erasure of African heritage experienced by the black Muslim in America. When black Muslims are referred to as "X," the speaker implicitly acknowledges this historical narrative. Furthermore, it incorporates that narrative into the identity of the one who has taken the name "X." The narrative becomes a

¹³⁷ Rosenzweig and Thelen, 10.

¹³⁸ Rosenzweig and Thelen, 150.

¹³⁹ X, 203.

part of who they are and how they appear in society. For Malcolm, the significance of placing this history-acknowledging signifier in his name is that “in the nation of Islam, [he] would be known as Malcolm X.”¹⁴⁰ The “X” provides names for members of the nation to call one another, and names to be called by outsiders. These names do not succumb to white history and society but assert their alternative black history. Notably, here Malcolm refers not to the “Nation of Islam” the organization of which he was a prominent member, but oddly to a “nation” of Islam, with a lowercase “n.” He seems to be talking not about members of his organization, but the citizens of a nation called Islam, similar to how one can be a citizen of a nation called the United States or France. In some ways this becoming a “nation,” instead of the organization the “Nation” is the project of Malcolm’s historical narrative. His name seems to help him imagine an alternative nation for black Muslim Americans, a nation his people can belong to as they withdraw from mainstream America. His “X,” this common surname which signifies a retold and remembered history of black Americans, open a space of alternative national belonging.

The city of Chicago legally grants him this signifier. Malcolm notes that he “received from Chicago my ‘X.’”¹⁴¹ In his own framing, this signifier is literally given to him by “Chicago.” The government municipality is the active agent. A government institution, in this framing, not only acknowledging that Malcolm’s name *is* “X” but seems to grant power to the alternative history that X signifies by allowing those called “X” to imagine themselves as common members of this alternative nation. Malcolm works his historical narrative into white mainstream society via this institution. Malcolm creates his alternative nation within the structures of American society. This seems possible on a grand scale for Malcolm, but starts at a very personal level.

¹⁴⁰ X, 203.

¹⁴¹ X, 203.

Malcolm exemplifies how the Nation's teaching changes black Americans' place in society by focusing on a small change in behavior that seems to lead to a reimagining among white Americans. When Malcolm first begins to follow the Nation, he stops eating pork in prison. Because "one of the universal images of the negro...was that he couldn't do without pork" his abstention from it caused "a commotion of talk."¹⁴² In this small moment one of the Nation's teachings changed the behavior of a black individual which in turn destabilized how the white population thought about him. This opens up the possibility of the whole of the "people" rethinking black Americans. Even small changes in understanding of the history and legacy of black Americans, such as a shift in diet, can lead, in Malcolm's account, to a major change in how mainstream white culture views black Americans. This relationship between small and large changes reflects the way Malcolm's personal narrative intertwines with a broad collective historical narrative. Personal histories contribute to a collective history which has the power to change society. The next steps are changes at the community level.

Another method for shifting the place of black Americans in society is changing how those individuals participate in the economy. The text advocates for black business owners to form a marketplace unique to them, withdrawing from the white-dominated economy and constructing an alternative way to conduct business in America. Malcolm relates that "The stores were examples to help black people see what they could do for themselves by hiring their own kind and trading with their own kind and thus stop their being exploited by the white man."¹⁴³ Similar to the notion of an alternative nation of Islam to which one could belong as a black Muslim in America, this conception of marketplace imagines a space unique to black Americans

¹⁴² X 159.

¹⁴³ X, 209.

where they are able to exist as citizens and economic actors without being exploited by white mainstream culture.

Similarly to how this project read the Federalists publishing their thought in *The Federalist Papers* in order to help Americans imagine their community a particular way, Malcolm intended his text contribute to the project of reorganizing black Americans into a new political public. As Frank puts it, the Federalists aimed to “establish a free government from popular ‘reflection and choice’ rather than ‘accident and force.’”¹⁴⁴ Frank argues that the American political community did not arise in some way naturally or by accident but was brought into being by the work and words of a group of political writers and thinkers. Malcolm’s autobiography, as this project has explored, is engaged in a similar project. Malcolm agreed to Haley’s autobiography project because he thought his “story may help people better appreciate how Mr. Muhammad salvages black people.”¹⁴⁵ This word implies a reconstructing from what exists into something new and better. Malcolm’s autobiography was conceived as a way to reach out to readers about the mission and success of Muhammad and the Nation, and to show an example of a man salvaged by those teachings.

Malcolm’s project is also similar to what Benjamin Franklin is attempting to do in the political project of his autobiography. According to Warner, Franklin produces a “fantasy of being-in-print,” in his public writings. Malcolm produces such a being-in-print in his autobiography, and it carries a political agenda. By presenting a new way of existing in the public to black Americans, he hoped to help them accept the teachings of the Nation and become members of a community he was helping to construct. There is another similarity between the two autobiographical projects. Both autobiographies were published soon after their

¹⁴⁴ Frank, *Publius*, 70.

¹⁴⁵ X, 393.

subjects/author's death. By the time each text came into print, producing a consumable fantasy of being-in-print for their readerships, the physical being the text depicted had ended. The physical bodies of Malcolm and Franklin were replaced with bodies of work, texts that expresses a being towards a particular end. The consumption of such beings by the American reading public plays a large role in shaping how the “people’s” imagining produces itself. Malcolm believed in this power of individuals and history to shape how a people thinks about itself.

After their long interviews, Haley would collect notes Malcolm had written while speaking. One reads “Only person really changed history those who changed men’s thinking about themselves”¹⁴⁶ and claims that the Nation’s leader Elijah Muhammad is such a person. One interpretation of this sentence indicates that events are changed by changing men’s thinking about themselves. For instance, Jesus changed the course of history by changing how people thought about themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Another possible reading is that Malcolm may have been thinking not only that the course of history can be changed, but that history itself, meaning how humans think about and remember events from the past, can be changed by changing how men think about themselves.

Malcolm’s autobiography can serve as a founding myth of the public. Just as Franklin’s text offered a common English heritage for its readership, the young American people, Malcolm’s autobiography provides a history for the black American which has the potential to unite this community with a common, noble heritage. Furthermore, Malcolm himself connects this remembered history and heritage with a rearrangement of the black American’s place in contemporary society. Nancy would call this the power of the origin myth that not only tells the story of drawing the people into an assembly but actually performs that assembling. Malcolm’s

¹⁴⁶ X, 396.

autobiography offers an alternative the founding myth and in doing so attempts to have a real effect on how American society is organized.

Part 2 Conclusion:

It seems impossible to quantify the effect such attempts at historical reimagining may have had on reading Americans, but one place such effects can be felt may be the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, one of America's most prominent cultural critics and a major memoirist. His 2009 *The Beautiful Struggle* provides examples of how attempts by black Americans to reimagine their place in American society continued to be impactful in his family and throughout his life. His father continues the type of historical work Malcolm X was committed to and often warned Coates white America had "forged a false Knowledge to keep [black Americans] down."¹⁴⁷ This is similar to Malcolm's idea where the white status quo of history is used to marginalize black Americans. Coates's father sought "a new revolution in...a bookstore, a printer, and a publisher."¹⁴⁸ Printed works become for Coates the space for and inciting event of revolution. Coates's father believes that through printing a new reality, the true reality of the black American, the white status quo can be overthrown. This is why, for Coates, the Conscious person believes the white man "don't want those books in print."¹⁴⁹ An alternative history in print is dangerous to the white man, just as Malcolm believed it to be. Understanding this history for Coates is akin to finding "the weaponry my ancestors had left for me."¹⁵⁰ This knowledge gives him the tools to understand and change his place in white America. He directly acknowledges "regal Malcolm"¹⁵¹ as a predecessor and sees such figures as rebels and revolutionaries that carved out an intellectual space alternative to white society.

¹⁴⁷ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2009.

¹⁴⁸ Coates, 84.

¹⁴⁹ Coates, 90.

¹⁵⁰ Coates, 41.

¹⁵¹ Coates, 44.

Coates notes that at the time, for him and other black youth, “Our heroes did not appear on stamps.”¹⁵² What, one wonders, would that young Coates have thought if he’d known that in 1999, one of his heroes would appear exactly on a stamp, his story given the stamp of approval of the U.S. government? Coates helps us understand the impact the intellectual work of figures such as Malcolm X had on Americans long after he died. The history and being he published lingered on and worked its way into the minds of many readers, Coates being one of the most famous examples. Malcolm reimagined the world and it seems conceivable that his imagining had an impact on the thinking of many Americans, until even the mighty U.S. federal government had to acknowledge his narrative, if only with his image on a stamp.

¹⁵² Coates, 132.

Conclusion:

“...all of it is now, it is always now, even for you who never was there.”¹⁵³

—Ian Baucom

The Crying of Lot 49 ends abruptly. It’s never made clear whether Trystero is real and the plot cuts off just as the crying of lot 49, the auctioning of part of Inverarity’s estate, begins. But *Lot 49* is just the beginning of Pynchon’s “California novels.” Pynchon publishes *Vineland* in 1990 and *Inherent Vice* in 2009, both novels set in the 1960s (although *Inherent Vice* seems to stretch into 1970). If *Lot 49* was a forward-looking novel expressing possibilities for social change in its historical moment, then, as some Pynchon scholars have argued, “*Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* are reflective novels, looking backward from within or under the impact of reactionary politics.”¹⁵⁴ These later novels reflect on that moment and the alternative political possibilities that seemed to lurk around every corner for Oedipa. Those possibilities, these later novels suggest, were not captured. Or, as another scholar put it, “Thus is it with the decade in which, Pynchon suggests, the country tragically failed to find some oasis in its desert of perception.”¹⁵⁵ The possibilities left open by the abrupt ending of *Lot 49* never materialize and Pynchon’s canon reflects on that failure in its repeated returns to the 60s.

¹⁵³ Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: finance capital, slavery, and the philosophy of history*. Duke University Press, 2005: 333.

¹⁵⁴ Shaub, 30.

¹⁵⁵ Cowart, 134.

By his later novels, Pynchon is “less interested in the possibilities for alternative communities than in the Althusserian focus upon mechanisms that maintain the status quo.”¹⁵⁶ We have, perhaps, already seen such a mechanism arise in the Malcolm X stamps. If their release was the U.S. government’s stamps of approval on Malcolm as a historical figure, the stamps and all they signify also allow the government to integrate his narrative into mainstream culture’s overarching narrative of the political public. One can read the stamps as Malcolm X and his thinking successfully interloping into the hearts, minds, and institutions of the Americans people, or read the same stamps as that totalizing federal system subsuming Malcolm’s narrative, incorporating his story into the machinery of the republic. Cowart says that the difference between *Lot 49* and the later California novels is that American conscience was “radicalized in the sixties, co-opted in the eighties.”¹⁵⁷ This threatens that the narratives which construct our very conscious as a political public were similarly co-opted. If so, this co-option may be reflected in our institutions, which reify and construct that imagining.

In 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act. *Shelby v. Holder* struck down Sections 4 and 5 of the 1965 legislation. Section 4 outlined that certain states must seek federal clearance before making electoral decisions while Section 5 laid out the clearance requirements.¹⁵⁸ The majority opinion argued that the protections these sections outlined were no longer necessary and amounted to federal overreach. They asserted the minority groups protected by the legislation were no longer in danger of having their voting rights restricted in the states, primarily southern, that the Act restricted. Since the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, the institutions of the federal government, such as the Justice Department, no longer necessarily oversee that certain demographics are represented. The lasting power of the historical

¹⁵⁶ Shaub, 34.

¹⁵⁷ Cowart, 119.

¹⁵⁸ Liptak, Adam. *Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act*. *The New York Times* 6/25/2013.

vulnerability of black Americans is denied, and as a result there are no longer institutional structures to assure their incorporation into the political imagining. The result seems to be widespread disenfranchisement. There is significant evidence that Voter ID laws limit access to voting and that minority groups are more likely to have their voting restricted by such laws.¹⁵⁹ Yet some studies have found that how badly a community suffers from voting restrictions can be more tied to educations and poverty levels than race.¹⁶⁰ Regardless, we find ourselves in a moment of public discourse, certainly not a unique one, where whose voice needs to be counted is a matter of public debate. Arguments over immigration and citizenship are obvious enough examples, but even individuals who are citizens, who have voted before, find their rights as citizens challenged and restricted. Specifically, the revocation of these sections of the Voting Rights Act was based on the theory that the situation was so different in modern times for these vulnerable communities that it is no longer necessary to afford them special institutional protection. Opponents argue that this ignores the historic disenfranchisement of these groups and denies the power this history still holds. The argument is in many ways specifically over how federal institutions are to defend this representation. Is who must be represented self-evident or must federal institutions be given oversight to assure that this representation is legitimate? Does our history hold a power which our institutions must address?

Coates again provides a useful lens through which to examine the contemporary problem of black Americans being excluded from the political public. Coates's 2015 *Between the World and Me* is a memoir clearly intended for publication, yet addressed to his "Son"¹⁶¹ in letter format. The similarity to Franklin becomes all the more striking as the memoir develops into a

¹⁵⁹ Sanchez, Gabriel R., Stephen A. Nuno, and Matt A. Barreto. *The Disproportionate Impact of Photo-ID Laws on the Minority Electorate*. Technical report, Latino Decisions, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Alvarez, R. Michael, Delia Bailey, and Jonathan N. Katz. "The effect of voter identification laws on turnout." (2008).

¹⁶¹ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the world and me*. Text publishing, 2015: 5.

cutting critique of the obliviousness of mainstream American culture. Coates points out that in 1863, America's definition of the "people" excluded black Americans and says that this naming of "the people" is "a matter of hierarchy."¹⁶² He criticizes the "Dream,"¹⁶³ his name for the fantasy of America that can only be held by those for whom acceptance into the "people" is a foregone conclusion. For Coates, this means Americans who consider themselves white. Coates talks about the imagining of the American political public as a dangerous fantasy where exclusion means serious risk to the body of the excluded.¹⁶⁴ He frames political imagining, and the exclusion it causes in white-dominated America, as a contemporary political problem. Franklin's autobiography presented an early popular imagining of the people. Coates harnesses the same power to expose the illusory nature of that imagining. This illusion, for Coates, has a very real impact on the bodies and political status of people of color.

This project does not assert that these questions pose a unique crisis for our time. Indeed, the public is constantly in a process of reimagining itself. Instead, this project hopes instead to draw attention to the ways that interactions with institutions and experiences as readers influence how we are imagining the public. Beyond the scope of the of this project, but worth considering, is how new forms of communication, such as online media, articulate a readable vision of the American political public, or even how other forms of narrative in 1965, such as film, dealt with narrating the public. Pynchon's later novels look back on the energy and possibilities of political imagination in the 1960s and see a wasted opportunity, but if imaginings of the American political public are constantly being constructed through institutions and reading, then the possibility for reconstructing those imaginings always exists and every moment of reading and

¹⁶² Coates, 7.

¹⁶³ Coates, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Coates, 12.

thinking of ourselves as a public is shot through with the latent potential of that transformative energy.

Each of this project's four primary texts narrates its own origins. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* informs the reader of its origins as a personal account meant for his son and prints the letters which supposedly convinced Franklin to create a work meant for public consumption. *The Crying of Lot 49*'s publishing history raises questions about the true date of the text's "origins" while the copyright page asserts its origin as 1965. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is perhaps the most interesting example, as while claiming a particular origin narrative in the title "autobiography," the subtitle, "As Told by Alex Haley," admits to its true authorship, a partnership between Malcolm and Haley. The Constitution, by speaking with the voice of the "people," claims to originate from the American political public as an exercise of their will and authority. The Constitution claims the public as its author and in doing so tells a particular story of its origin, the same way as any of this project's other texts.

Halfway through writing the second chapter of this project, I purchased a sheet of the 1999 Malcolm X stamps.¹⁶⁵ I have since used those stamps to send letters to a friend in Colorado whom I asked to be my pen pal. I have to use two stamps on one envelope as the price of a letter has increased since 1999. When I started this project, I only knew I'd write on Franklin's autobiography. The Post Office didn't enter my thinking until I reread *The Crying of Lot 49*. Malcolm wasn't going to be a part of the project until I opened his autobiography and read his daughter's fixation on the stamp. This project attempts to narrate the origins and transformations of the American public and in doing so draws together texts from two historical moments which articulates visions of the public attached to institutions. New narratives have the power to produce new ways of imagining the public. What is the basis of mass political movements but

¹⁶⁵ \$11 on Amazon from the seller StampSales.

such narratives? Malcolm sees the leaders of all successful political movements as participating in this process of helping individuals reimagine themselves and their historical narratives: narratives of who we were, who we are, and who we could be. Such narratives can be the heart of a civil rights movement or grounds for the rise of fascism populism. These narratives define us, and we find them, or don't, in texts we read together.

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