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Motives of Humanity: Saint-Domingan Refugees and the Limits of Sympathetic Ideology in Philadelphia

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Motives of Humanity:
Saint-Domingan Refugees and the Limits of Sympathetic Ideology in Philadelphia

A Thesis Presented

by

JONATHAN E. DUSENBURY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Philadelphia

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ABSTRACT

MOTIVES OF HUMANITY:
SAINT-DOMIGAN REFUGEES AND THE LIMITS OF SYMPATHETIC IDEOLOGY
IN PHILADELPHIA

MAY 2014

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This thesis examines two crises that occurred in Philadelphia in the middle of the 1790s: the arrival of refugees from the revolution in the French West Indian colony of Saint-Domingue and the outbreak of yellow fever that followed their arrival. These crises are studied together in order to understand the challenges that they posed to the post-Revolutionary culture of sensibility and to the sympathetic construction of social order that drew upon this culture.

Philadelphians' post-Revolutionary sentimental project – the reorganization of society along lines of fellow-feeling, benevolence, and emotional parity – was strained by the arrival of refugees from Saint-Domingue and by the outbreak of epidemic disease. Both of these events were opportunities to actuate sympathetic ideologies, and in both cases, action fell short of rhetoric. This thesis examines why this was the case.

Central to Philadelphians' ambivalence in creating sympathetic social bonds was the presence of people of color – American and foreign – in the city. When asked to extend fellow-feeling to black Philadelphians and black Saint-Domingan refugees, white Philadelphians equivocated. The reorganization of society in the post-Revolutionary period had presumed emotional equality among Americans, but the issue of race repeatedly demonstrated weaknesses in the application of this ideology.

The crises examined within this work demonstrate the enduring appeal of sensibility in 1790s Philadelphia. They also demonstrate its weaknesses. As more and more groups use the language of sympathy and benevolence to voice their demands, sensibility faltered. This thesis builds upon a growing scholarship that examines the effect of the Haitian Revolution on the United States to argue that the arrival of refugees from that revolution to Philadelphia highlighted fundamental ambivalences and fault lines in the United States' post-Revolutionary sentimental project.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the ways in which two related crises – the arrival of refugees from the French colony of Saint-Domingue and Philadelphia’s 1793 yellow fever epidemic – pulled at the boundaries of the United States’ post-Revolutionary sympathetic social order. By focusing on Philadelphia, it examines the city that was not only the birthplace of American independence and the site of the new national capital, but that was also the epicenter of sentimental ideology in the young republic. That the crises herein examined both occurred in Philadelphia allows for an analysis of the multiple dimensions by which Americans conceptualized social order and social relationships in this period. The first crisis discussed began outside of the United States in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in the summer of 1791. Thousands of refugees – black and white – arrived from the French West Indies in the 1790s. Americans’ responses to their arrival revealed fault lines in the construction of sympathetic sociability. While sympathetic language pervaded public and private responses to the arrival of (especially white) refugees, the actions taken for their relief reveal a more fundamental ambivalence towards their presence and the possibility of finding a place for them within the sympathetic social order.

This was far more true of the African-descended slaves which were brought by the hundreds into Philadelphia. Unlike their masters, black Saint-Domingans could not generally rely upon Philadelphians’ sympathy. Issues of race certainly marked them as distinct, and their economic ties to their masters through slavery or indentured servitude made charitable action implausible for most white Philadelphians. However, the Saint-Domingans slaves’ associations with black political violence was the biggest roadblock

to their inclusion within Philadelphians' imagined community of sympathy.

The response to Philadelphia's second crisis bears this assertion out somewhat more. In the wake of the refugees' arrival, yellow fever (more likely than not imported from the West Indies along with the Saint-Domingans) broke out in Philadelphia. Thousands of people died, and thousands more fled. The general social collapse precipitated by the epidemic gave some, however, the chance to argue for a restructuring of the city's social order. The debate between white publisher Mathew Carey and black community leaders Absalom Jones and Richard Allen highlights the economic and racial dimensions of this discussion. Jones and Allen's response to Carey's characterization of the city's black community's actions during the epidemic was couched in the language of sympathetic citizenship. As we shall see, for those white Philadelphians who championed sensibility as a hallmark of American identity and political action, black inclusion within this political and social order undermined the supposedly expansive and "universal" character of sympathy.

When presented with the presence of foreign blacks – especially foreign blacks associated with the violent overthrow of white colonial society – white *and* black Philadelphians remained largely silent. The revolution in Saint-Domingue dampened many Philadelphians' sympathy for both abolition and black independence, in general. Thus, while black refugees' race – along with their language, religion, and culture – made them largely unassimilable in 1790s Philadelphia, it was the specter of black political activity that most undermined the possibilities for sympathetic bonds between these individuals and Philadelphians. Why this should be so for black leaders like Jones and Allen can only be debated – they made no statements about the presence of so many

foreign slaves in Philadelphia. However, it is reasonable to assume that the violence of the slave uprising in the French colony made the possibility for transnational black solidarity in Philadelphia a political liability.

The Haitian Revolution's impact on the development of the United States has become a popular subject for study in recent decades. The historical links between the first two republics in the Western Hemisphere are quickly being recovered from a historiographical tradition that tended to excise the black state from Western history. This thesis argues that the Haitian Revolution, as an event in and of itself, but also as the source of two crises that erupted in Philadelphia in the middle of the 1790s, challenged the ways in which Americans had imagined the construction of social order in their newly-independent country. In this way, the revolution, its refugees, and the disease they brought with them, are part of the debates over the expansion sympathetic community in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The twin crises of refugees and yellow fever would highlight faults – but also possibilities – in the culture of sensibility.

CHAPTER I

THE CULTURE OF SENSIBILITY IN THE ANGLO-ATLANTIC WORLD

Imagination soon transported me to the field of battle ; there, in heaps, I beheld my slaughtered friends ; there did I also see numbers of wounded, stretched upon their native land in agonizing pain ; while the cruel, savage enemy stood insulting over them, and tormenting their already mangled bodies with the bloody bayonet, deaf to all the cries of mercy, and void of every tender feeling of humanity : then would I behold my countrymen expiring in agonies unutterable, while others were dragged away, bound, and treated in the most insulting scoffing manner. And can it be, thought I ! is this *really* so ?—O day of sorrows ! must America indeed fall ! after resisting so long too ! after so many of her sons have nobly dared to die in her defence, must they die in vain?¹

In 1780, as South Carolina widow Eliza Yonge Wilkinson recounted General Benjamin Lincoln's surrender at the siege of Charlestown, she imaginatively transported herself to the scene, picturing in her mind the horrors of battle and the vicissitudes of war. The rebellious colonies, she feared, were in danger of losing their war for independence after having sacrificed so much for the cause. Nevertheless, she held out hope, concluding her letter to a friend with her wish "that America, my dear native land, may long, very long, even to the end of time, be distinguished as the favorite of heaven, and delight of mankind, by a strict adherence to every Godlike act ; may humanity, piety, and tender sympathy be the distinguished character of every son and daughter of America."²

At the time of the Revolution, the culture of sensibility reigned in the Anglo-Atlantic world. Wilkinson's invocation of the virtues of humanity and sympathy put her squarely in the middle of discourse of social organization that had taken on a particular urgency in the wake of the imperial crisis that had precipitated the push for disunion. The

¹ Letter VII, *Letters of Eliza Wilkinson during the Invasion and Possession of Charlestown, S. C. by the British in the Revolutionary War*, ed. Caroline Gilman (New York: Samuel Colman, 1839), 82.

² Letter VII, 86.

colonies' commitment to sensibility and a shared emotional culture was moved to the forefront in discussions of the need for independence from Great Britain. Wilkinson's assertion that the enemy was "void of every tender feeling of humanity" echoed a pervasive belief that Britain had lost the necessary emotional capacity to rule the colonies. Following the victory, sympathy and sensibility would remain pervasive and popular discourses for imagining the reconstruction of society in the young nation. The culture of sensibility would become "Americanized" following the break with Great Britain, and persist through the Constitutional and political debates of the 1780s and 90s as a viable project for shaping the new republic.

How did sensibility become such a popular cultural mode in Britain and its cultural outposts in North America? At the time of the American War of Independence, sensibility was already at its peak in many areas, especially in metropolitan Britain. Its rise had been precipitous. Most historians and literary scholars date the triumph of sensibility to around the middle of the century, though its origins lay in particular intellectual, political, social, and economic changes whose roots reached back well into the seventeenth century. In becoming the dominant cultural orientation of the middle decades of the eighteenth century, sensibility bound together a number of threads, among them Enlightenment-era natural and moral philosophy, Latitudinarian theology, emergent middling-rank values, and women's political and social activity.

The study of this culture has until very recently been confined to literary scholarship, as the dominant cultural product of sensibility was the sentimental novel. However, these novels reflected a more pervasive cultural orientation with real social and political consequences which are only just starting to be studied by historians. The

historiography of sensibility is thus dominated by discussions of the rise of its cultural products, but these discussions shed real light on the rise of the culture of sensibility more generally. In order to understand when and how sensibility become so popular – how it “triumphed” – it is necessary to reach back and study the changes that were taking place in Britain after the Civil War. As belief in humanity’s natural sociability and benevolence grew in Britain and its colonies, British culture came to reflect these values. But this triumph was not preordained. Its rise was the result of the timely intersection of momentous reorientations taking place in British society.

Historiography of the Culture of Sensibility

Literary historians and other scholars of the period between 1700 and 1750 have long identified this age of literature between Augustan and Romantic as distinct from either of the latter periods. Indeed, even late-eighteenth-century observers commented on the transformation of literature, and remarked on the reorientation of social norms and values that the new literature reflected. Until the mid-twentieth century, that period was given a variety of names, but scholars agreed that the age was defined by a few social and cultural orientations, chief among them benevolence, charity, and sentiment. These values not only pervaded the literature of the late eighteenth century, but became widespread social and cultural ideals, with far-reaching social consequences. Recent scholarship has attributed various manifestations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanitarian thought, and indeed the emergence of twentieth-century ideas of universal human rights, to the effects of sentimental literature and a culture of sensibility.

The consensus of those who have written about this period is that it represented something new in literature and culture – a breaking-point from those values which had

defined the age immediately preceding it. Many scholars have contended that the values of benevolence, charity, and sentiment as they manifested themselves in the late eighteenth century would have been unthinkable a century before, and “would have been frowned upon, had it ever been presented to them, by representatives of every school of ethical or religious thought.”³ This realization of the novelty of the literary and cultural values of the age of sensibility has inspired much scholarship concerned with the origins of those values, on top of discussions of the particular nature of the age of sensibility and its influence. My purpose here will be to examine the development of the history of the origins of the age of sensibility, to draw a historiographical account of how literary and cultural historians and other scholars have discussed how benevolence, charity, and sentiment became the defining values of the late eighteenth century.

C. A. Moore’s 1916 article in *PMLA*, “Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England, 1700-1760”, provides a jumping-off point for the examination of the last century’s worth of scholarship on the origins of the age of sensibility. Moore began his article by stating that eighteenth-century English literature was marked by a growth in altruism, which he traced back chiefly to the works of Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, and especially to Shaftesbury’s seminal work of ethical theory, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711).⁴ Moore stated that the purpose of his investigation “is to show that the adoption of [Shaftesbury’s] ideas by popular writers in England was widespread, and that, since theology and ethics were subjects of vital interest, the *Characteristics* had a large part in determining the content of English

³ R. S. Crane, “Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling’,” *ELH* 1:3 (Dec., 1934): 207.

⁴ C. A. Moore, “Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England, 1700-1760,” *PMLA* 31:2 (1916): 264.

literature.”⁵

Moore admitted that little that Shaftesbury proposed was original – much of it came from the Latitudinarian movement within the Anglican Church. However, Moore argued that Shaftesbury’s importance lay in the fact that his writings “satisfied an inclination of the age that needed only an authoritative direction.”⁶ At the end of the article he restated this contention, arguing that “[Shaftesbury’s] importance arises not so much from novel proposals advanced as from the sureness with which he interpreted the vague predisposition of the age towards new modes of thought and feeling.”⁷ Thus, the receptiveness to new ideas was prevalent throughout eighteenth-century English society; Shaftesbury, as an aristocrat and gentleman-philosopher, provided the authority and direction.

Moore saw Shaftesbury’s particular popularity derive from the fact that he antagonized two schools of thought increasingly out-of-touch with the tendencies of the time – the orthodoxy of the Anglican Church and the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.⁸ Shaftesbury’s deistic conception of God undermined the force of biblical precept as a guide to conduct, and provided a new basis for understanding ethical thought and behavior. Moore summarized Shaftesbury’s main points as being: 1) Man is naturally a virtuous being, and is endowed with a “moral sense” which distinguishes good from evil; 2) just as “moral sense” is independent of experience, virtue is eternal and immutable, and should be sought for its own intrinsic beauty; 3) virtue is merely the perfect development of aesthetic sensibility; and 4) compassion and benevolence are not only

⁵ Moore, 265.

⁶ Moore, 267.

⁷ Moore, 322.

⁸ Moore, 266.

instinctive, but the highest virtue to which a person can attain.⁹ Thus, Shaftesbury contradicted not only the Hobbesian concept of man's natural egoism, but also the Church's ideas of virtue and charity. Shaftesbury contended that the Church's insistence on the afterlife destroyed man's natural relish for goodness and virtue in the name of religion.¹⁰

Moore thus maintained that Shaftesbury's theories had a profound impact on the development of ethical thought in eighteenth-century England, providing a point of departure for later thinkers who wished to combat egoistic ideas of human nature. Moore did not concern himself with a culture, or age, of sensibility – his focus is solely on the literature of eighteenth-century England. However, scholars after Moore tied sentimental literature to a larger eighteenth-century cultural phenomenon which the literature of the period reflected. Thus, Moore's focus on literature is insightful, as the origins of sentimental (or, to use his terminology, altruistic) literature are the origins of the larger cultural phenomenon of sensibility.

To prove that Shaftesbury was at the root of this new idea of human nature, Moore put forward several lines of evidence, which he summarized as “the undeniable fact of his general popularity, the explicit citation of his ethics by various writers, the minute agreement of others, and the reluctant adoption of the essentials by still others.”¹¹ All of these things are true – Shaftesbury was a widely popular and influential theorist, and the literature of the eighteenth century was concerned with social issues that engaged his ideas about human nature, benevolence, and charity. That one man should be at the

⁹ Moore, 269-70.

¹⁰ Moore, 271.

¹¹ Moore, 323.

root of such a large cultural phenomenon, however, caused subsequent scholars to push at the edges of Moore's argument.

In a 1934 article in *ELH*, R. S. Crane contended that the major problem with Moore's explanation "is that it begins too late."¹² Instead, Crane suggested instead that

the key to the popular triumph of "sentimentalism" toward 1750 is to be sought, not so much in the teaching of individual lay moralists after 1700, as in the combined influence of numerous Anglican divines of the Latitudinarian tradition who from the Restoration onward into the eighteenth century had preached to their congregations and, through their books, to the larger public essentially the same ethics of benevolence, "good nature," and "tender sentimental feeling" . . .¹³

Crane argued that the Latitudinarians, between 1660 and 1725, represented an anti-Puritan, anti-Stoical, anti-Hobbesian reaction to prevailing ideas about human nature, passion and reason.¹⁴ Long before Shaftesbury gained popular acclaim in intellectual circles in England, Latitudinarian preachers were preaching that virtue lies in universal benevolence and "good nature."¹⁵ Crane wrote that "the most significant result of their efforts was the dissemination of the idea that man is essentially a gentle and sympathetic creature, naturally inclined to society not merely by his intellect . . . but still more by 'those passions and inclinations that are common to him with other Creatures' . . ."¹⁶

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the theme of man's universal benevolence and social orientation had become commonplace, the hallmark of every charity sermon.¹⁷ Thus, unlike Moore, who emphasized Shaftesbury's popularity arising

¹² Crane, 207.

¹³ Crane, 207.

¹⁴ Crane, 230.

¹⁵ Crane, 208.

¹⁶ Crane, 222.

¹⁷ Crane, 228.

from his opposition to clerical ideas about virtue and benevolence, Crane saw the latter as instrumental in spreading “propaganda of benevolence and tender feeling” to a wider audience, outside of Shaftesbury’s social and intellectual milieu.¹⁸ To support his argument, Crane relied on a wide swath of collected sermons and religious and moral treatises published between 1660 and 1725, all of which include rhetoric similar to Shaftesbury’s and most of which predate his major work. Crane admitted that this is in no way meant to serve as an exclusive explanation of the rise of the age of sensibility in mid-eighteenth-century England, and he acknowledged that Shaftesbury’s ideas were important, especially as reinforced by his disciple Francis Hutcheson. However, he concluded that focusing on the ideology and influence of the Latitudinarian movement within the Anglican Church makes the origins of sensibility “somewhat more intelligible historically than it has hitherto seemed....”¹⁹

In 1962, Louis Bredvold offered a “natural history” of sensibility in his work of the same name. In it, he claimed that “the history of an idea may be also the life history of an idea, and the historian may think of his work as biology or ecology, or, perhaps best of all, as that old-fashioned study called ‘natural history.’”²⁰ His purpose was to attempt to trace “the life history of that complex of ideas and feelings which the eighteenth century called ‘sensibility,’ to observe its development and flourishing and fruit, with the expectation that an idea, like a plant, may reveal its real nature by the course of its growth.”²¹

Bredvold traced the origins of sensibility to four major thinkers – Shaftesbury,

¹⁸ Crane, 230.

¹⁹ Crane, 230.

²⁰ Louis I. Bredvold, *The Natural History of Sensibility* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 5.

²¹ Bredvold, 5.

Adam Smith, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – while acknowledging the contributions of the Latitudinarians (whom he identifies as the Cambridge Platonists).²² Drawing upon Crane’s work nearly three decades earlier, Bredvold described the anti-Calvinistic motivations of contemporary Anglican theologians, and their championing of virtue and benevolence.²³ Thus, Bredvold argued that “the Cambridge Platonists represent an early and influential phase of the long development of ethical theory.”²⁴

Nevertheless, Bredvold saw the advent of the ethical theory that undergirded the culture of sensibility as the contribution of four influential philosophers, whose lives and works represented phases in the development of sensibility. The first, of course, is the Earl of Shaftesbury, whose influence has been described above and is not elaborated upon by Bredvold in any significant way beyond Moore’s work. Following Shaftesbury in the natural history of sensibility is Adam Smith and his 1759 work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, wherefrom, Bredvold argues, ideas about sympathy entered English minds and culture.²⁵

After Smith (about whom Bredvold says woefully little) comes David Hume, whom Bredvold called “the greatest English philosopher of the century.”²⁶ Hume’s contribution to the development of sensibility came from his attribution of morality and justice to custom and, perhaps most importantly for the purposes of a history of sensibility, to passion.²⁷ Bredvold wrote that, according to Hume, “[w]e are just, not because we obey a moral law (which Hume regards as a psychological impossibility), but

²² Bredvold, 8.

²³ Bredvold, 8-9.

²⁴ Bredvold, 9.

²⁵ Bredvold, 19.

²⁶ Bredvold, 21.

²⁷ Bredvold, 21.

because we are moved by the passions of sympathy and benevolence.”²⁸ Bredvold argued that, like Smith, Hume based his ethical theories on an ethics of feeling.²⁹ Following Hume is Rousseau, who, like his predecessors, believed that conscience and morality were matters of sentiment, not judgment.³⁰ In surveying these four thinkers, Bredvold stated that it is perhaps reasonable “to conclude that the sentimental ethics was a continuous development and that it was basically the same urge however its expression varied from one writer to another.”³¹ Ultimately, the men’s influence was in their rejection of the idea of moral judgment in placing human impulses as the supreme guide to happiness and goodness. As Bredvold concluded in his history of the origins of sensibility: “This reliance on the supreme freedom of our good impulses as an assurance of the salvation of man was perhaps the most important contribution of the movement of sensibility to our modern ways of thinking.”³²

In 1974, R. F. Brissenden published the most comprehensive examination of the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility to that point in the twentieth century. The work was a broad and deep analysis of multiple facets of the phenomenon it describes, and part of the work was given over to Brissenden’s attempt to define sentimentalism. Within the space of that definition, the author laid out this history of the concept, and in so doing added to the historiographical debate by seeking to affirm the influence of two men who had been overlooked until that point by other scholars: John Locke and Robert Whytt.

Brissenden began his history of the concept of sentimentalism by declaring:

²⁸ Bredvold, 21-2.

²⁹ Bredvold, 23.

³⁰ Bredvold, 24.

³¹ Bredvold, 24.

³² Bredvold, 26.

“Sentimental ideas are complex and to some extent contradictory, and their development in England and on the Continent, especially in France, though generally similar and often intimately related, did not always follow exactly the same path. But like so many other ideas in the eighteenth century, they derive from one basic notion. That is that the source of all knowledge and all values is the individual human experience.”³³ Here he invoked Locke, whose 1690 treatise *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* laid the foundation for a theory of human knowledge based on the senses and sensory perception. Indeed, the words “sensible” and “sentimental” are derived from the word “sense”.³⁴ Thus, Brissenden declared that in the eighteenth century man found himself confronted by the fact that, whether or not God exists, the only way to understand himself was via the evidence available and that “this evidence must ultimately rest on the way in which feeling, thinking, *sentient* individual human beings experience the world of ‘external, sensible objects’ and the ‘internal Operations of [their] Minds’.”³⁵ From this experience, man derives not only his knowledge of the physical universe, but also his moral sentiments.

While Brissenden believed that Lockean sense perception theories of human understanding were necessary causes of the dawning of the age of sensibility, he did not see them as sufficient for producing a culture based upon universal benevolence, virtue, and charity. Brissenden admitted that “Lockean sensationalist epistemology would seem to provide a firm basis for a completely relativist or subjectivist ethical theory; and it is a short and, some would argue, logical step from something like the humane scepticism

³³ R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richard to Sade* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 22.

³⁴ Brissenden, 22.

³⁵ Brissenden, 23.

[sic] of David Hume's ethical position to the bleak and anarchic moral nihilism espoused and advocated by the Marquis de Sade."³⁶ Nevertheless, a belief in man's innate benevolence did arise in this period, and was widely and pervasively held. Brissenden acknowledged the ideas of the Latitudinarians in this regard, and of David Hume and Adam Smith, but stated that "they obviously feel that this [man's innate benevolence] is something that can be more or less taken for granted; and so it tends to be assumed and asserted rather than demonstrated and argued for with any vigour."³⁷

To explain the rise of the idea of man's innate benevolence, Brissenden latched onto the related idea of man's innate sympathy with other humans, as articulated by Adam Smith and others. Brissenden chose two treatises as instrumental examples of the pervasiveness of ideas of human sympathy, in both its social-scientific and its psychological and physiological aspects. The first, Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, has already been discussed. The second is Scottish physician Robert Whytt's *Observation on the Nature, Causes and Cure of those Diseases which are commonly called Nervous, Hypochondriac or Hysterical: to which are prefixed Some Remarks on the Sympathy of the Nerves*. Whytt's contribution was to clarify and extend a physiological idea of sympathy dating back to Greeks, demonstrating how certain physical states or processes – yawning, laughing, weeping, vomiting, hysteria, and fear, among others – can be sympathetically excited in one person by another. In so doing, Whytt provided empirical physiological support for Adam Smith's argument that it is through sympathy that human beings are basically able to communicate with each other.³⁸

³⁶ Brissenden, 26.

³⁷ Brissenden, 28.

³⁸ Brissenden, 30-31.

Two years later, G. S. Rousseau responded to Brissenden's ideas in a paper entitled "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility". Like Brissenden, Rousseau wrote that "the eighteenth-century revolution in intellectual thinking...owes its superlative debt to John Locke."³⁹ Rousseau agreed that sensibility, based off on ideas of Lockean sensationalism, were at the heart of this revolution. However, the origins of sensibility must be traced much further back than to Whytt in 1764 or even Locke in 1690. Rousseau's argument contained two parts: first, that no adequate theory of perception arose, or could arise, until physiological questions pertaining to anatomy were at least partially solved; and second, that a scientific approach to the study of man, as seen in Scottish morality and English empirical philosophy, required as a prerequisite a developed sense of physiology.⁴⁰

This understanding of physiology was to be found in English physician Thomas Willis's *The Anatomy of the Brain* (1664) and *The Pathology of the Brain* (1667). According to Rousseau, Willis was the first scientist to clearly and loudly posit that the seat of the soul was strictly limited to the brain.⁴¹ The limitation of the soul to the brain built upon already-established knowledge that the nerves carry out the tasks set by the brain; limiting the soul to the brain, and drawing this connection between the nerves, the brain, and the soul, formed the basis of the idea that the nerves control human consciousness.⁴² Rousseau argued that if "the soul is limited to the brain, as Willis and his followers in the 1670s contended, then nerves alone can be held responsible for

³⁹ G. S. Rousseau, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility," in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century III*, ed. R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 141.

⁴⁰ Rousseau, 150-1.

⁴¹ Rousseau, 143.

⁴² Rousseau, 148.

sensory impressions, and consequently for knowledge.”⁴³

Locke, who was a student of Willis’s at Oxford, took these ideas further to make arguments about sensory perception, learning, and the association of ideas.⁴⁴ Thus, if one agrees (and Rousseau did) with the influence of Lockean ideas of understanding via sense perception on later moral sense philosophers, as was described by Brissenden in 1974, it follows that “no novel of sensibility could appear until a revolution in knowledge concerning the brain, and consequently its slaves, the nerves, had occurred.”⁴⁵ Willis’s contribution was that he inspired generations of subsequent scientists and theoreticians to study the “science of man” to make arguments about human nature in its physiological, psychological, and social forms. Ideas about human sympathy are rooted in the contributions made by Willis to the understanding of human physiology – Rousseau believes that “Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Adam Smith, and many others . . . carried [Locke’s] brilliant act of integration to its fullest possible conclusion.”⁴⁶

The works of Brissenden and Rousseau represent the last of a historiographical generation surrounding the origins of the age of sensibility. While scholars from Moore to Rousseau identified various philosophers and intellectual movements to which the origins of the age of sensibility could be attributed, each man was firmly grounded in an approach that reflected a commitment to doing intellectual history – a history of ideas. In the decades following Brissenden and Rousseau, the approach to the origins of the age of sensibility would change to reflect larger changes regarding historical approach within the field of history. The rise of social history (and “New Historicism” in literary studies)

⁴³ Rousseau, 146.

⁴⁴ Rousseau, 150.

⁴⁵ Rousseau, 153.

⁴⁶ Rousseau, 150.

would give rise to a new generation of scholars whose approaches represented the changing preoccupations of the field. Chief among these preoccupations is a focus on class formation and relationships.

Janet Todd's *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986) identified a number of historical factors that gave rise to the age of sensibility: "the shifting importance of various classes, the growth of London, the increase in publishing and literary activity in the provincial towns, the changing perceptions of the family and its importance within society, the economic and cultural situation of women, and the interrelated developments in religion, philosophy, and science."⁴⁷ Each factor received some discussion in her analysis of the historical background of sensibility, and she maintained that the rise of sensibility is not a matter of "simple cause and effect...but a matter of emphasis and number."⁴⁸

Much of Todd's description of the religious, philosophical, and scientific ideas that influenced and precipitated the advent of the age of sensibility added nothing new to the historiography of that era. Further, her examination of changing conceptions of the family and women is remarkable only in so far as she actually discussed the family and women (which was something of an accomplishment given previous scholarship, to be fair); nevertheless, her focus was on sentimental ideas about women and the family, and not so much on how changes in the latter influenced the former. She briefly remarked upon women writers, but the role that actual historical women played in bringing about the age of sensibility (instead of how the latter addressed women) was a process that will be better analyzed in later works.

Todd's most significant accomplishment and contribution to the historiographical

⁴⁷ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 10.

⁴⁸ Todd, 10.

debate regarding the age of sensibility was her analysis of how shifting class relationships contributed to it. She argues that the Hanoverian succession in 1714 provided political stability for Britain and appeared to denote a shift in class power – although the country was still ruled by an aristocratic elite, the power of the middle classes was felt to be rising.⁴⁹ The rise of middle class wealth and power increased their influence as literary consumers, leading to more cheaply-produced and widely-available books.⁵⁰ Todd claimed that middle class literary consumers wanted instruction as well as entertainment, especially in the realm of ethics. Periodicals, drama, and novels all reflected this preoccupation with ethical instruction.⁵¹

Nevertheless, many members of the middle classes had an ambivalent relationship with sentimental literature. On the one hand, for those members of the bourgeoisie who aped the lifestyles of the aristocracy, sentimental literature's images of leisure, rural escape, and unproductive bliss provided a welcome diversion from the market. However, eighteenth-century writers had some difficulty relating class and sensibility – many considered sensibility to be the reserve of the higher-born.⁵² Whatever the feelings of writers toward sensibility and class, though, merchants appeared quite frequently in sentimental literature, displaying the values of their class – individualism, personal effort, domestic piety, competition, and probity.⁵³ And indeed, as middle class wealth grew, the alliance of city money and aristocratic property produced huge landed estates that reinforced traditional aristocratic values among the arriviste middle class.⁵⁴ Thus it was

⁴⁹ Todd, 11.

⁵⁰ Todd, 12.

⁵¹ Todd, 12.

⁵² Todd, 13.

⁵³ Todd, 11.

⁵⁴ Todd, 11.

quite possible for middle-class consumers of sentimental literature to associate the refined sensibilities of the aristocracy and genteel classes with their own increased social status, and to believe that marrying into the aristocracy and rearing children in an aristocratic environment would produce offspring of refined sentiment. In any case, it was a goal for which a member of the middle class could strive.

Following developments within the field of history, the decade of the 1990s saw increased attention to the role of women in the origins of the age of sensibility, and to the culture of sensibility as a gendered phenomenon. The most influential gender history of sensibility is G. J. Barker-Benfield's 1992 book, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Like Brissenden's work nearly two decades previous, Barker-Benfield's book is a far-reaching analysis, concerned with far more than the origins of sensibility. However, he did dedicate some space to addressing the origins of sensibility, and to the role that women played in the process.

According to Barker-Benfield, "[t]his culture [of sensibility] was brought into existence in decisive part by the public 'awakening' of a critical mass of Englishwomen."⁵⁵ In describing this process of "awakening", Barker-Benfield went back to the Protestant Reformation in England and its attendant increase in literacy, both male and female, in the seventeenth century. Further, Barker-Benfield identified challenges by Puritan women during the Civil War to the patriarchal order as being instrumental for the bringing to fruition of a tradition of independent action by laywomen, leading to women establishing churches and preaching, and eventually to women writers and women's

⁵⁵ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xviii.

publishing.⁵⁶ Barker-Benfield declared, “By 1700 women’s publications would enter a rapidly expanding domestic market. Women’s increasing literacy and their writing novels would be fundamental to the creation of the culture of sensibility.”⁵⁷

After declaring the central role of women in the origins of the age of sensibility, Barker-Benfield devoted some thought to examining the process whereby women rose to the point where they could publicize their wishes, basing his argument not on the traditional intellectual history that had characterized the field, but on the social and economic history of Britain.⁵⁸ Here he echoed and elaborated on Todd’s contention that the roots of the age of sensibility are to be found in class transformations – for Barker-Benfield, the economic transformations, and most especially the emergent consumer revolution, of the preindustrial period is essential to understanding the advent of women writers and the rise of a culture of sensibility.⁵⁹ As such, Barker-Benfield left gender history aside to examine the economic and social changes that took place within Britain in the early modern period before devoting the rest of his analysis to an examination of the development through the eighteenth century of the culture of sensibility through the lens of women and gender. Ultimately, he argued, “[t]he culture of sensibility became a culture of reform, aiming to discipline women’s consumer appetites in tasteful domesticity....”⁶⁰

The latter statement reflects Barker-Benfield’s larger concern with the progress and outcomes of the age of sensibility as opposed to its origins, but may also be

⁵⁶ Barker-Benfield, xviii-xix.

⁵⁷ Barker-Benfield, xix.

⁵⁸ Barker-Benfield, xix.

⁵⁹ Barker-Benfield, xxii.

⁶⁰ Barker-Benfield, xxvi.

indicative of one of the flaws of his analysis, as later scholars would criticize his lack of distinction between causes and consequences. Further, his lack of attention to the role actual historical women played in the process of bringing about the age of sensibility would require that this role be elaborated by later historians of the eighteenth century.

In 1996, Markman Ellis criticized Barker-Benfield's argument about the gendered construction of manners and consumer behavior by writing, "In inflating the category of sensibility to such global and totalising effects, it is hard to see whether it is being treated as a cause or a symptom of the emergence of a new construction of femininity."⁶¹ Ellis agreed that the age of sensibility *entailed* a wide range of cultural practices which cumulatively described and proscribed the way women lived and were regarded, but wrote that it is erroneous to see such a phenomenon as being the cause of the culture of sensibility.⁶²

Nevertheless, Ellis believed that Barker-Benfield was on the right track when he discussed the rise of women's writing in the eighteenth century. Ellis argued that "literary historians have long known [that] the eighteenth century witnessed a profound increase in the number of women writers, especially in the second half of the century.... The emergence of women novelists in the eighteenth century is based on a simultaneous (but also in some sense causal) expansion of the number of women readers: in short, it is women readers that make women writers."⁶³ In order to understand the rise of the culture of sensibility from the province of an isolated aristocratic intellectual milieu to a widespread cultural phenomenon, including its attendant reconstruction of femininity,

⁶¹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27.

⁶² Ellis, 27.

⁶³ Ellis, 24-25.

one must understand how the ideas and ideals of sensibility were disseminated amongst women. For this, Ellis argued, “[l]iterary historians... have argued that such a role was filled by an alliance composed of the new domestic fiction such as the sentimental, and the popular moral polemic, the conduct book.”⁶⁴

Conduct books aimed at middle-class young women were designed to educate their audience in proper manners, offering a model of feminine behavior that was consciously different from the aristocratic, which was written off as luxurious and exhibitionist. Middle-class young women in the eighteenth century were expected to develop proper behavior not through display, but through the sort of inner virtue that was already being discussed by the Latitudinarians and Britain’s moral sense philosophers.⁶⁵ Conduct books themselves arose out of a history of Renaissance political discourses (such as Machiavelli’s *The Prince*), advice books for aristocratic sons, and Puritan manuals for marriage and household management. The earliest example of a conduct book for women is probably George Savile, Marquis of Halifax’s *Advice to a Daughter*, published in 1688.⁶⁶

Interestingly enough, Ellis noted an oppositional attitude towards novels in conduct books. Novels were often excluded from conduct book’s lists of “entertaining books” for women, and condemned outright as garbage at best and dangerous at worst. Often, the writers of conduct books noted that sentimental novels contained all of the moral instruction of conduct books, but that wading through the rubbish of the story was not worth the effort to receive that instruction.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, he noted that the “anxiety

⁶⁴ Ellis, 28.

⁶⁵ Ellis, 28.

⁶⁶ Ellis, 28.

⁶⁷ Ellis, 32.

about fiction suggests that reading was a site of considerable cultural significance in the eighteenth century – that it mattered what was read (not only between authors, but also genres) and by whom.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, however, Ellis argued that “in searching for the origins of sensibility in the ‘history of ideas’, the proximity of the conduct-book tradition to the site of novel reading and writing argues strongly that it is a more interesting and fruitful context for the novels than the moral philosophy of Smith and Hume.”⁶⁹

The culture of sensibility developed in eighteenth-century Britain as a result of a variety of transformations – intellectual, scientific, political, economic, social, and culture – in that country reaching back into the previous century. The crystallization of sensibility in the second half of the century brought these strands together in the form of a new social orientation, one whose diverse appeal reached across lines of class and gender, and across the vast distances that separated the island nation from its cultural outposts across the Atlantic. In Britain’s colonies, sensibility would be transformed in the last four decades of the eighteenth century, as the imperial crisis, and eventually the independence of the United States, prompted a reconceptualization of the national qualities of this particular cultural ethos.

The Culture of Sensibility in America

That Philadelphia was the key site for the proliferation of sentimental ideas in North America during the second half of the eighteenth century is not surprising. Throughout the century, the city had been the preeminent North American port of entry for people arriving from Europe, and for the goods and ideas they brought with them.

⁶⁸ Ellis, 34.

⁶⁹ Ellis, 34.

Philadelphia's flourishing print culture and energetic transatlantic trade put the city's emerging commercial classes in close contact with their counterparts in Britain, and middling-rank and elite Philadelphians participated in the commercial revolution on par with middling-rank and elite Britons. Booksellers in particular were highly effective conduits of transatlantic exchange, and as such they enabled a popularization of sensibility in Philadelphia and the American colonies in general.⁷⁰

Sentimental novels were the chief product of the culture of sensibility throughout the middle decades of the eighteenth century. However, no novels were written and published on American soil until after the Revolution; as such, colonists read the works published in Britain and imported to the colonies. From these novels, Americans absorbed the same ideas about benevolence, charity, and fellow feeling as their British brethren. In the decades between the end of the Seven Years' War and the outbreak of the Revolution, Americans attempted to draw upon this shared sensibility to redress their grievances with Parliament. The government in London, however, met their appeals with contempt and mockery. Rebuffed, colonial leaders retrenched more deeply into the emotional culture of sensibility, shifting their tactics from an attempt to affirm their membership in a larger Anglo-Atlantic sentimental culture towards an assertion of British insensibility and of the superior worth of American emotion.⁷¹ As Nicole Eustace writes, "Virtuous colonists had been unable to move unfeeling Britons; supplication was useless where sympathy was wanting."⁷²

⁷⁰ Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 67.

⁷¹ Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 387.

⁷² Eustace, 428.

In this way sensibility became revolutionized. As the colonies moved closer to independence and war, the virtues of sentimental culture were harnessed by the colonial elite as justification for the break. Further, shared sentiments were vital to the project of building a new nation. Only superior American emotion could bind the colonists together. Civic commitment – indeed, the capacity to govern – was supposed to derive from the public spirit motivated by sympathetic bonds.⁷³ As colonial leaders undertook the project of effecting independence from the metropole and creating a new country, they constructed sympathy and shared emotionality as the underpinning of the republic and its people. Sympathetic identification among Americans was the necessary precursor to the development of a national identity.⁷⁴

Following the Revolution, a remarkable proliferation of statements about sensibility were made from various corners of the new country. Physicians, poets, political leaders, essayists, ministers, lawyers, and moralists all generated mountains of writings extolling the benefits of sensibility.⁷⁵ A reprinted letter by Lawrence Sterne in Philadelphia's *Independent Gazetteer* in 1788 reminded Philadelphians that "Sensibility is the source of those delicious feelings which give a brighter colour to our joys, and turn our tears to rapture. Though it may now and then lead us into a scrape, as we pass through life—you may be assured, my dear friend, it will get us out of them all, *at the end of it* ;--and that is a matter which wiser men than myself will tell you, is well worth thinking about."⁷⁶ Sensibility was an important framework for understanding the self, and

⁷³ Eustace, 428.

⁷⁴ Eustace, 428.

⁷⁵ Knott, 195.

⁷⁶ "Letter on SENSIBILITY, by the immortal Sterne," October 20, 1788, *Independent Gazetteer* vol. VIII, iss. 891, pg 3.

the relationship between the self and society. However, the ideology was invested with a political hue as well.

Sentimental ties had been supposed to provide the foundation for social relationships in a republican society. Instead of the relationships of hierarchy and deference that characterized monarchical society, republicanism offered the opportunity for social relationships based on the recognition of a type of parity between different groups of Americans – emotional parity. In the Revolutionary period, the architects of the sentimental project had been willing to collapse some of the distinctions between different classes in the name of natural equality based on shared emotionality.⁷⁷ The turbulence of the post-Revolutionary period, however, disturbed many of this first generation of revolutionaries. The political, social, and economic tensions that accompanied victory threatened to undo the order constructed with independence.

Sarah Knott claims that the sentimental project of the Revolutionary period was at its most developed during the debates over the ratification of the Constitution, articulated by both its supporters and its opponents.⁷⁸ Sensibility was shared ideological territory for Federalist and Anti-Federalists. The project of representative government rested upon the notion that elected leaders could adequately *represent* their constituents. For opponents of the centralizing tendencies of the Constitution, the “fellow feeling” necessary between representative and citizen was based in proximity and resemblance. For the document’s supporters, such proximity and resemblance prescribed too narrow a sympathetic identification. While history has generally characterized the Federalist project as anti-sentimental, these middling and elite Americans were as invested in the sentimental

⁷⁷ Eustace, 388.

⁷⁸ Knott, 195.

project as their political opponents. For them, good governance required men of refined sensibilities who felt “sympathy with the wants of any one, and a generous benevolence to all.”⁷⁹

Ultimately, the Federalists were triumphant and a new nationalist government was inaugurated at the end of the 1780s. However, this was no calm and perfecting revolutionary settlement. Throughout the 1790s, sensibility continued to be familiar and appealing to Americans across the political spectrum, including those excluded from exercising formal citizenship.⁸⁰ Julia Stern has argued that the young republic’s most popular early novels, of which William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) is the earliest example, “give expression to the latent, reprobated social and political impulses of those Americans who do not ‘count’ in the language of the Founding....”⁸¹ Despite the seeming apolitical nature of sentimental novels – with their focus on plots centered around romantic love, the passions, blushes, sighs, and tears – these works were nevertheless the sites of considerable political debate. By addressing audiences who lacked political power – laboring classes, women, African Americans, aliens – America’s sentimental novels created a political role for literature.⁸² Relegated to the margins of post-Revolutionary society, disenfranchised groups continued to be invested in understanding themselves and the world through the prism of sympathy and sensibility. Unwilling to accept the limitations imposed by the new order, these “outsiders” drew upon the prevailing cultural discourses of the Revolutionary period to challenge the

⁷⁹ Knott, 243-4.

⁸⁰ Knott, 265-6.

⁸¹ Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6.

⁸² Ellis, 2-4.

boundaries of civic participation and social belonging.

Thus, in the 1790s, sensibility and sympathy would be claimed by new voices, and drawn into controversy. As more and more groups placed claims on the culture of sensibility, the ability of sentimental ideology to reconcile disparate political orientations and goals was strained. The ability of this ideology to withstand the demands placed upon it would depend upon its capacity for meeting the challenges the new nation would face – foreign and domestic. In the previous decade, the leaders of the new nation had invested sensibility with the task of creating a new social whole.⁸³ In the last decade of the eighteenth century, this culture was called upon to live up to the ideals it was supposed to espouse. It was a challenge that could not always be met.

⁸³ Knott, 321.

CHAPTER II
SAINT-DOMINGAN REFUGEES AND THE CRISIS OF SYMPATHETIC
SOCIAL ORDER

One of the first challenges to the ideal of sympathy in the 1790s came from outside the United States' borders. In 1791, the French colony of Saint-Domingue – often called “the jewel of the Antilles” – was the most productive European colony in the Americas. The western third of the island of Hispaniola, an area one-sixth the land area of Virginia, accounted for forty percent of France's foreign trade. It produced two-fifths of the world's sugar and half of its coffee, nearly out-producing the rest of the French and British West Indies combined.⁸⁴ All of its fantastic wealth was predicated upon a system of agricultural production that exploited the labor of enslaved Africans. Of the half a million residents of the colony, 452,000 were enslaved.⁸⁵ It is estimated that in 1789, at the time of the last colonial census and just before the start of the revolution in France, two-thirds of Saint-Domingue's slave had been born in Africa.⁸⁶ Additionally, the mortality rate for slaves brought into the colony was 50 percent between the first three to eight years.⁸⁷ In a society where “white planters...extracted a life's worth of labor in the briefest time imaginable,” this meant that the vast majority of the colony's population had been brought there against their wills sometime within the previous few years.⁸⁸ Slaves in the French colony were literally worked to death.

In August 1791, they would rise up en masse against the people and the system

⁸⁴ Garvey F. Lundy, “Early Saint Domingan Migration to America and the Attraction of Philadelphia,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 12:1(2006), 77.

⁸⁵ Lundy, 78.

⁸⁶ Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 25.

⁸⁷ Fick, 26.

⁸⁸ Lundy, 78.

that enslaved and exploited them. As the various groups of whites and *gens de couleur libres* who also inhabited Saint-Domingue argued over power and representation following the outbreak of the French Revolution two years earlier, their slaves used the political chaos to free themselves and make demands of their own. The uprising began in Saint-Domingue's wealthy and fertile northern plain, where slaves from the region's sugar plantations spent weeks planning their rebellion in a series of nighttime meetings.⁸⁹ From August 21st to 23rd, thousands of slaves went from plantation to plantation, burning houses and fields and killing whites.⁹⁰ Within a few days, the colony's white and mulatto population would organize to combat the slave rebellion, committing acts of violence as horrendous as those of their slaves.⁹¹ Soon, the conflict spread out of the north into the rest of Saint-Domingue. For thirteen years, France's prized colony would become a landscape of destruction, death, and civil war.

The initial outbreak of violence that would become the Haitian Revolution produced a small trickle of emigrants who would arrive in the United States. Between July and December 1791, eight ships brought 82 Saint-Domingan colonists to Philadelphia. In the year 1792, as the slave rebellion spread throughout the colony, some 599 refugees arrived at Philadelphia's docks.⁹² These were simply the advance guard of a flood of exiles who would arrive the following summer. On June 20, 1793, the colony's military governor, Francois-Thomas Galbaud, led a force of local whites, sailors, and free people of color against the colony's capital and largest city, Cap-Français. In response,

⁸⁹ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 94.

⁹⁰ Dubois, 94.

⁹¹ Dubois, 96.

⁹² Gary B. Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti in the American North: Black Saint-Dominguans in Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 65(1998), 47.

Saint-Domingue's civilian commissioners, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, appointed by France's revolutionary government to administer the colony, promised freedom to any of the insurgent slaves who would fight to defend the city against the invasion.⁹³ For days, all sides engaged in violence and killing while the city burned. When Galbaud's forces were eventually driven from the city, they took much of Cap-Français's white population with them. Following these fleeing colonists from Cap-Français came their compatriots from the colony's other principal city, Port-au-Prince, and from the colony's other ports.

In the three years after the outbreak of the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue, thousands of men, women, and children found their way to the United States as refugees. Of the 3,084 men, women and children who came to Philadelphia in the early days of the revolution, it is estimated that 2,236 were white, 32 were *gens de couleur libres*, and 816 were enslaved people of African descent. The majority of these would come in the months following the burning of Cap-Français in June 1793 – over 2,200 of them between the summer of that year and April 1794.⁹⁴ However, Philadelphia was not the only – or even the most attractive – destination for these refugees. They sought asylum in the eastern seaboard port cities of New York, Baltimore, Norfolk, Savannah, Charleston, and New Orleans.⁹⁵ Indeed, of the cities in which white Saint-Domingans sought refuge, Philadelphia presented a critical downside: since 1788, the state of Pennsylvania had guaranteed emancipation for any slave brought into the state after six months of residence.⁹⁶ Slaveholding Saint-Domingans were in real danger of losing their human

⁹³ Nash, 48.

⁹⁴ Nash, 50.

⁹⁵ Lundy, 79.

⁹⁶ Nash, 46; Lundy, 76.

property in Philadelphia, after having just escaped a rebellion of their slaves at home.

Nevertheless, Philadelphia presented many incentives for seeking refuge there. Garvey Lundy argues that many fleeing Saint-Domingan colonists may have simply boarded the first ship available to whisk them to safety and thus ended up in Philadelphia. Others may have deliberately chosen the city because of its role as the cultural, political, and economic center of the United States.⁹⁷ Saint-Domingan colonists had longstanding commercial ties to the city. Almost all of the coffee imported into the United States came from the colony, and most of it came through Philadelphia.⁹⁸ A 1793 newspaper report commenting on the importance of Saint-Domingue's contribution to world trade noted that the United States had imported some \$2,615,000 (or 13,065,000 *livres*) worth of goods from the colony.⁹⁹ Saint-Domingan colonists also knew that the national capital was the center of French culture in the new nation, hosting the French revolutionary government's minister to the United States, Citizen Genet, and well as hundreds of refugees from the revolution in France.¹⁰⁰

Whatever the motives individual Saint-Domingan colonists may have had for coming to Philadelphia, their presence was more than, as J.H. Powell has commented, "just one more housing crisis."¹⁰¹ The arrival of three thousand refugees – white, black, and mulatto, slave and free – in just three years had a profound social impact on the city of Philadelphia. At the height of the influx of refugees, there were approximately 5,000

⁹⁷ Lundy, 83.

⁹⁸ Lundy, 77.

⁹⁹ *The Independent Gazetteer*, August 10, 1793.

¹⁰⁰ Nash, 46. The best source for French refugees is still Frances Sergeant Childs' *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1800* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940). Childs estimates that upwards of 25,000 refugees from both France and its colonies arrived in the United States during this period (64).

¹⁰¹ J.H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 5.

refugees in Philadelphia from France and its colonies.¹⁰² This would have meant that in the middle of the 1790s, French refugees made up about ten percent of the population of the capital of the United States. Their presence in all American cities, but especially in Philadelphia, challenged the ideals upon which the nation had been founded, and to which it aspired. According to Garvey Lundy, “no other American destination was as influenced by the presence of refugees or émigrés as Philadelphia—a city that endeavored to live up to the ideals of the founding fathers of the young republic.”¹⁰³ In 1776, Thomas Paine had called upon Americans to “receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.”¹⁰⁴ Throughout the post-Revolutionary period, debates over America’s policies towards the naturalization of foreign residents were shaped by the country’s wartime commitment to prepare such an asylum.¹⁰⁵ The arrival of refugees in Philadelphia would inspire heated debates over the nature and extent of this asylum, of American charity and republican benevolence, and of the responsibility of the United States and its people to provide for and alleviate the suffering of others.

The outpouring of sympathy in Philadelphia for the exiles from Saint-Domingue – especially those fleeing the burning of Cap-Français – was immediate. As part of a nationwide urban public sphere, Philadelphia’s newspapers recounted the efforts to extend philanthropy to refugees in those cities which received them first, and the newspaper accounts of the refugees’ plight appealed the American audiences in much the

¹⁰² Allan Potofsky, “The ‘Non-Aligned Status’ of French Émigrés and Refugees in Philadelphia, 1793-1798,” *Transatlantica* 2(2006), <<http://transatlantica.revues.org/1147>>.

¹⁰³ Lundy, 76.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1976[1776]), 100.

¹⁰⁵ For more on this topic, see Marilyn Baseler’s *“Asylum for Mankind”: America, 1607-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). Baseler’s discussion of the 1780s and 90s focuses mostly on the naturalization of resident aliens, but her framework is useful for approaching questions of refugee policy and fears of Europe’s (or the West Indies’) “depraved masses.”

same way as the popular sentimental novels of the era.¹⁰⁶ The *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser* reprinted an article from a Baltimore newspaper on July 11, 1793, commending the citizens of that city for their relief efforts on behalf of the refugees. The newspaper declared, “It reflects the highest credit on the citizens of Baltimore, thus to step forward on behalf of the distressed inhabitants of St. Domingo, most of whom we understand have been plundered of their ALL, and are now come to seek protection, and an asylum for their persons, in the land of freedom, peace, and plenty.”¹⁰⁷ Two days later, an editorial in the same newspaper argued that the United States’ neutrality in the conflict between Britain and France nevertheless “permits her to take the part of a sympathizing friendship . . . [for] the tempest beaten inhabitants of St. Domingo.”¹⁰⁸

Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser reported on August 7th that a collection had been taken in Philadelphia to benefit “the distressed Citizens from Cape-Francois” and that one thousand dollars was to be distributed so that the citizens of the city could “continue to extend relief to the sufferers as they have heretofore done.”¹⁰⁹ Two days later the *General Advertiser* reported that a “collection in this city [Philadelphia] for the relief of the unfortunate St. Domingo sufferers, independent of the Theatre, and Circus benefits, and of the collection made by the French patriotic society already exceeds 10,000 dollars . . . and will probably produce 3,000 more.”¹¹⁰ From the French Society of the Friends of Liberty and Equality, established by refugees from France, the Saint-

¹⁰⁶ Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 59.

¹⁰⁷ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, July 11, 1793.

¹⁰⁸ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, July 13, 1793.

¹⁰⁹ *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*, August 7, 1793.

¹¹⁰ *General Advertiser*, August 9, 1793.

Domingue colonists received no less than 800 dollars.¹¹¹

An opinion piece in the Republican *General Advertiser* commented on how fortunate the refugees were “to find through the humanity of the citizens of the United States, and of the French societies, the most immediate relief in their multiplied distresses.”¹¹² The *Independent Gazetteer* reprinted a piece from the *Connecticut Courant* that reported that “the melancholy fate of Cape-Francois, with the situation of the other settlements of St. Domingo, must excite compassion in every human heart. The humane attentions of our brethren of the middle states to the suffering inhabitants who have been fortunate enough to escape with their lives, deserve, and I believe, receive the gratitude of the sufferers, and the applause of all good men.”¹¹³ Later in August, the *General Advertiser* ran the text of a sermon given at a Baltimore Catholic church, noting that “the public, who have manifested so much benevolence to the unhappy sufferers, will read with pleasure a translation of some passages of this sermon”:

It is painful perhaps to you to hear me speak these truths in a foreign land, and in the midst of a people, mild, affable, generous and beneficent, who, compassionating your misfortunes, wish to erase the memory of them from your minds, and have succeeded, at least, in softening their rigour, by their general and unanimous concurrence in affording you relief; who receive and harbour you as brethren so much more dear, as your wants are more urgent.¹¹⁴

There is ample evidence that Americans took seriously Thomas Paine’s 1776 charge. These newspaper editorials indicate that the Philadelphia community, along with other cities which hosted refugees, not only showed real generosity in extending charity to the latter, but reveled in their own benevolence and humanity. The response to the arrival of

¹¹¹ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, July 12, 1793.

¹¹² *General Advertiser*, July 31, 1793.

¹¹³ *Independent Gazetteer*, August 10, 1793.

¹¹⁴ *General Advertiser*, August 23, 1793.

refugees allowed Americans to reaffirm their own sense of purpose and identity in the revolutionary Atlantic world.

However, despite the attestations of some observers, support for the refugees was never unqualified. As a center of abolitionist activity in the United States, some in Philadelphia were uncomfortable with extending charity to slave-owners. One newspaper commented that “Heaven is just, and perhaps the signal vengeance inflicted upon the French settlements, is the reward of the infamous traffick in human bodies, and a prelude to further and more extensive depredations in the West-Indies.”¹¹⁵ The Saint-Domingans’ French compatriots in Philadelphia were equivocal in their support, affirming that, while they did not “in any manner approve of the conduct of the greatest number of the colonists...convinced that their prejudice and aristocracy of colour, not less absurd and prejudicial to mankind than the heretofore French nobles, have been the principal cause of all the evils which now assail them,” nevertheless the members of the French Society of Friends of Liberty and Equality felt obliged by the colonists’ current distress to open a subscription relief fund.¹¹⁶ Likewise, Thomas Jefferson noted in a letter that “the situation of the St. Domingo fugitives (aristocrats as they are) [nevertheless] calls aloud for pity and charity.”¹¹⁷ An editorial in one newspaper argued that Americans’ charitable efforts could only be temporary measures of relief, and something more permanent was needed. To that end, the anonymous writer, who claimed to not be above “shedding tears over the unfortunate fate of these fugitives,” nevertheless advocated a plan for removing the Saint-Domingan refugees to land that the government would purchase from the Native

¹¹⁵ *Independent Gazetteer*, August 10, 1793.

¹¹⁶ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, July 12, 1793.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, July 14, 1793, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 26, ed. John Catanzariti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 503.

American tribes of upstate New York.¹¹⁸

In August 1793, the relief committee in Philadelphia devised a system of rankings to determine need. At the top of this hierarchy sat “persons who have property left, and are therefore, although subjects of commiseration, not within the purview of these contributions.”¹¹⁹ Below this class of individuals, the Philadelphia committee allocated funds for those colonists desirous of returning to the Caribbean or to France, and for those who would like to find employment either in the city or in the countryside. Finally, funds were allocated for “women whose husbands were massacred, and such as are in helpless condition, and from whose exertions for their own support, nothing ought to be expected.”¹²⁰ The assumption underlying this scheme, and those like it established in other cities, was that able-bodied men could and should work to support themselves and their families, and that employment for these men was readily available in the United States, or back in Saint-Domingue or in France.¹²¹ It was only the responsibility of Philadelphians to assist these men in finding employment – long-term poor relief was not their prerogative.

This attitude towards Saint-Domingan refugees reflected a larger ideology of private poor relief in post-independence Philadelphia. John Alexander has argued, “In the postindependence era, the granting or withholding of charity reflected the more precise definitions formulated by the dominant society to differentiate between the honest and the vicious poor.”¹²² Tied to this distinction between worthy and unworthy poor was a

¹¹⁸ *General Advertiser*, July 31, 1793.

¹¹⁹ *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*, August 9, 1793.

¹²⁰ *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*, August 9, 1793.

¹²¹ White, 69.

¹²² John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 123.

complementary belief that aid should be directed at promoting “deferential industrious poverty.”¹²³ While it is safe to say that non-poor Philadelphians’ concerns about distinguishing the deserving poor were directed primarily at the city’s local poor population, their ideologies were quickly mapped onto the refugees who arrived in the months following the burning of Cap-Français. It is possible to find examples of charitable efforts in 1790s Philadelphia that were rooted in basic humanitarian concerns; this is especially true of responses to natural disasters.¹²⁴ Perhaps the “tempest beaten” refugees from Saint-Domingue fell into this category. Nevertheless, even these charitable efforts were directed within the context of Philadelphia’s interlocking ideals that charity should provide relief only to the worthy poor and that such relief should control the poor and force them to be industrious.¹²⁵ The Philadelphia relief committee’s ranking system for the relief of refugees clearly reflected these ideals.

In any case, locally-directed relief efforts were quickly drained in the months following the greatest influx of refugees, the summer of 1793. Charity and relief outlays in the 1790s followed centuries-old practices whereby each community was responsible for the oversight of its own poor population. At the time of the refugee crisis, there existed no nationwide system for dealing with the destitute.¹²⁶ This does not mean that refugees and local charitable organizations did not turn to the national government in search of help. Federal officials were inundated with letters from refugees seeking relief. In August 1793, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson forwarded along a letter received by President Washington from “one of the unhappy fugitives of St. Domingo, of the name of

¹²³ Alexander, 141.

¹²⁴ Alexander, 140.

¹²⁵ Alexander, 140-141.

¹²⁶ White, 61.

Lentilhon, now at Baltimore.”¹²⁷ In January 1794, President Washington received a letter from Auguste de Grasse, a refugee in Charleston and a descendant of Francois de Grasse, the French admiral whose victory at the Battle of the Chesapeake had prevented the British from evacuating General Cornwallis from Yorktown, thus giving the Americans the decisive victory that would secure their independence. Washington’s secretary responded to de Grasse, writing that “representations are made daily to him from various parts of the United States, by your Countrymen, in the same unfortunate predicament as yourself.”¹²⁸ The previous month, the President had forwarded to George Read, the Chief Justice of Delaware and former Continental Congressman, a letter from two women in Philadelphia, noting, “I have received so many applications of a similar nature and some of them from Imposters, that I find it necessary to guard what little relief I am able to afford, against imposition.”¹²⁹

While federal officials were sympathetic to the plight of the refugees, they initially limited their charity to the private realm. Dandridge’s letter to de Grasse states, “No man feels more for your distresses than the President, nor is any one more willing to contribute to their alleviation, than he is.... [H]aving no public fund which he is authorised to apply to these objects, his private purse is inadequate to satisfy the deplorable cases which are brought before him....”¹³⁰ To the two French women at Philadelphia, Washington wrote “my private purse is inadequate, and there is no public money at my disposal.” Nevertheless, he sent them twenty-five dollars due to his “very

¹²⁷ Thomas Jefferson to James McHenry, August 26, 1793, 26:759.

¹²⁸ Bartholomew Dandridge to Auguste de Grasse, January 29, 1794, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745 to 1799*, vol. 33, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1931), 257.

¹²⁹ George Washington to George Read, December 26, 1793, 33:217.

¹³⁰ George Washington to George Read, December 26, 1793, 33:217

poignant feelings for the distress you describe yourselves to be in.”¹³¹ In a letter to James Monroe, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I deny the power of the federal government to apply money to such a purpose but I deny it with a bleeding heart. It belongs to the state governments. Pray urge ours [Virginia] to be liberal.”¹³²

Further, the officials of the federal government were not themselves sure how they felt about the refugees. While the consensus was that the refugees’ condition was pitiable, how they came to be in that position was questionable. Jefferson considered the refugees aristocrats. James Madison contended that they might have been traitors to the French Republic.¹³³ Between the arrival of the refugees in the summer of 1793 and Congress’s ambivalent extension of charity the following February, members of Washington’s cabinet were engaged in a discussion of the refugees’ status under the United States’ commercial and maritime law. What may be seen a simple (and fairly boring) discussion of tonnage duties in fact reflects a larger question of the merit of the refugees’ claims for relief. After receiving a letter from the governor of Virginia on the question of the refugees’ responsibility to pay duty fees on the property brought with them to the United States, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton sought the opinion of Attorney General Edmund Randolph on whether or not these refugees fell under the exemptions of Section 38, which allowed for exemption from duties for ships who sought refuge in a US port as a result of distress at sea.¹³⁴ Randolph responded that, while “it is a desirable thing, for the cause of humanity, that the vessels therein described

¹³¹ George Washington to Madames Laurent de Saxij and Laurent de Verneuil, December 26, 1793, 33:257-8.

¹³² Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, July 14, 1793, 26:503.

¹³³ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, From 1789 to 1856*, ed. Thomas Hart Benton (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1857), 475.

¹³⁴ Alexander Hamilton to Edmund Randolph, November 9, 1793, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 15, ed. Harold C. Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 394.

should be exempted from Tonnage,” that exemption must come from an act of Congress as “the cause of their quitting the Island of St. Domingo” was not “the Species of necessity contemplated” by the exemption to the collection law.¹³⁵ Hamilton agreed, and wrote as much to Jefferson, arguing that the law was not applicable in cases when “a vessel which, induced by a civil insurrection to quit a foreign port, finds it most convenient to make a voyage to the united States.”¹³⁶ The executive branch was not willing to make special dispensation to the refugees without the explicit consent of the legislature. Sympathy for the refugees could only count for so much – the laws and institutions of the newly-inaugurated federal government had to be observed.

The debate over the nation’s collective responsibility to the refugees would eventually be brought to the floor of the House of Representatives, and Congress, for their part, agreed with their counterparts in the executive. In January 1794, the national legislature sitting in session at Philadelphia debated the worthiness and the constitutionality of providing charity to the refugees out of federal funds. Maryland Congressman Samuel Smith, who had received a petition from his state’s relief committee, stated his belief that “such a scene of distress had never before been seen in America,” and that “there never was a more noble and prompt display of the most exalted feelings” than Americans’ sympathetic and charitable response to the arrival of refugees from Saint-Domingue.¹³⁷ However, Virginia Representative (and future President) James Madison, while he wanted to relieve the sufferers, also warned against the creation of a dangerous precedent; he could not “lay his finger on that article in the Federal

¹³⁵ Edmund Randolph to Alexander Hamilton, November 15, 1793, 15:p.n..

¹³⁶ Alexander Hamilton to Thomas Jefferson, November 30, 1793, 15:p.n..

¹³⁷ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, 462.

Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents.”¹³⁸ New Jersey Congressman Elias Boudinot countered that

by every moral obligation that could influence mankind, we were bound to relieve the citizens of a Republic who were at present our allies, and who had formerly been our benefactors. . . . When a number of our fellow-creatures had been cast upon our sympathy, in a situation of such unexampled wretchedness, was it possible that gentlemen could make a doubt whether it was our duty to relieve them?¹³⁹

Further, if Madison wanted assurances as to the constitutionality of such an action, Boudinot thought he needed only refer to Congress’s mandate to “provide for exigencies regarding *the general welfare*.”¹⁴⁰ In the end, arguments like Boudinot’s won out – In February, Congress authorized up to \$15,000 dollars to be placed under the direction of President Washington and to be drawn and distributed at his discretion. However, Congress also authorized that same money to be drawn against the debt owed by the United States to France.¹⁴¹

Thus, this was not a simple act of benevolence. If Congress was uncertain of its responsibility for providing charity, it was well within its rights to authorize funds to pay down foreign debt. Further, the path Congress chose attempted to skirt the geopolitical issues at hand. Authorizing charity for Saint-Domingan refugees might perhaps have violated President Washington’s April 1793 declaration of neutrality in the war between Great Britain and revolutionary France.¹⁴² Under the terms of the United States’ 1778

¹³⁸ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, 462.

¹³⁹ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, 463.

¹⁴⁰ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, 463.

¹⁴¹ 3rd Congress. 1st Session. *An Act Providing for the relief of such of the inhabitants of Saint Domingo, resident within the United States, as may be found in want of support*. 1794.

¹⁴² “Neutrality” is perhaps a misnomer – the declaration does not include that word or any form of it, opting instead to declare the United States “impartial.”

treaty with France, the former was bound to (among other things) protect France's West Indies colonies.¹⁴³ While the neutrality act did not necessarily abrogate the United States' obligations to France, it did circumscribe the ability of the government and of private citizens to come to France's aid.¹⁴⁴ By deducting the sum given to the relief of the refugees from the total of the debt owed to France, the government of the United States sent an ambivalent message to France's revolutionary government and to the wider Atlantic world about its intentions. The government of France had not yet responded to the burning of Cap-Français and the emancipation of the colony's slaves. The United States government could not in the meantime appear to give charity to a group that might come to be seen by their own government as opponents of republican revolution. Further, the government had no desire to embroil itself in a European conflict and risk the ire of the British Navy and its retaliation on the high seas.

The federal government's attempt to skirt responsibility for the maintenance of the refugees also represented a larger ideological debate about the government's role in providing charity and relief. Congress's response was an attempt to steer a middle course that skirted the constitutional issues at hand.¹⁴⁵ When James Madison was reminded that he had presented a resolution to indemnify American citizens for losses suffered at the hands of British privateers, he responded that "the vessels of America sailed under our flag, and were under our protection, by the law of nations, which the French sufferers unquestionably were not."¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he was sure that the people of the United

¹⁴³ Gordon S. Brown, *Toussaint's Clause: The Founding Fathers and the Haitian Revolution* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 69.

¹⁴⁴ Brown, 71.

¹⁴⁵ White, 73.

¹⁴⁶ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, 463.

States would act from magnanimity, generosity, and benevolence to relieve the suffering refugees from Saint-Domingue. Thus, it was not with the scope of Congress's power to authorize aid and relief for non-citizens. This was quickly challenged by other representatives who reminded him that distressed Americans abroad had in recent years been aided by the governments of Great Britain and Portugal. Samuel Smith of Maryland demanded, "Are we to stand up here, and tell the world that we dare not perform an act of benevolence? Is this to be the style of an American Congress?"¹⁴⁷ The federal government's response to foreign refugees in its territory was confounded by the contradiction between its desire to stay within its mandate and its desire to present the United States as a benevolent member of the community of nations.

The representative of the French government in the United States, its Minister Plenipotentiary, "Citizen" Edmond-Charles Genêt, shared the American government's ambivalence towards the Saint-Domingan colonists. In an open letter to the people of Baltimore, he commended the refugees' "generous reception" and the "affecting recital of the fraternal cares you have bestowed upon Frenchmen in distress." Pointedly avoiding the background of the refugees' arrival in the city and in the United States, Genêt wrote, "Without investigating the cause of their misfortunes, their situation is deplorable; it calls for pity, and will no doubt engage the attention of the representatives of the [French] nation." However, Genêt felt that he had to wait until the French government had responded to the refugee crisis and to the situation in its colony before organizing a relief effort on behalf of the French Republic. Until such time, he would only take "provisional measures" towards the refugees, and rely on the goodwill of the citizens of the United

¹⁴⁷ *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, 475.

States.¹⁴⁸ France's ambassador to the United States was in the same predicament as the American government – he needed to wait until France had passed judgment on the situation before making an official response. Further, Genêt privately expressed misgivings about the refugees in the United States in his letters to Thomas Jefferson. In September, he wrote to Jefferson, “I am very sensible, Sir, of the measures you have taken to abort the odious projects of certain refugees from St. domingue and it would be all the better if we could expel entirely this race as well as certain aristocratic émigrés from Europe all the more dangerous to the peace, liberty, and Independence of the United States than all the corsairs of the world.”¹⁴⁹

Sympathetic accounts of the plight of the refugees and of the benevolence of their hosts also served to underscore the fundamental differences of station between the two. When an editorial from a Charleston newspaper reprinted in Philadelphia called upon Americans, “reposing in the lap of fortune, [to] be not unmindful of those whom she has banished from her presence,” the appeal served not only as a call to action but as a reminder of the comfortable situation Americans presumably enjoyed.¹⁵⁰ When another article enjoined the people of the United States to “remember, that when they were in the most distress for men and money, during their contest for independency, the Gallic nation assisted them with a plentiful supply of each, and without whose aid, the liberty, peace, and happiness we now enjoy would not (in all probability) have been accomplished,”

¹⁴⁸ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, July 30, 1793.

¹⁴⁹ Edmond Charles Genêt to Thomas Jefferson, September 13, 1793, 27:113. The original letter is in French, and reads, “Je suis très sensible, Mr., aux mesures que vous avés prises pour faire avorter les projets odieux de quelques réfugiés de St. domingue et il seroit à souhaiter que l’on put expulser entièrement cette race ainsi que celle des émigrés aristocrates d’Europe bien plus dangereux pour la paix la liberté et l’Independence des Etats unis que tous les corsairs du monde.”

¹⁵⁰ *General Advertiser*, August 1, 1793.

Americans were also reminded of the reversal of fortune now facing the two groups.¹⁵¹ Americans, having recovered from their wartime deprivations, were now being called upon to aid their former benefactors: “Recollect that they did not desert you in your struggle for freedom—reflect that they have some right to shelter themselves under the tree, which their assistance enabled you to plant.”¹⁵² At the center of these calls for benevolence and sympathetic fellow-feeling was a reminder of the lines that divided the Americans from the Saint-Domingan colonists. Sympathy reinforces the very differences it seeks to overcome.¹⁵³

Philadelphians also feared the disruptive potential of the refugees from Saint-Domingue. In August, the federal government received word from Citizen Genêt that “certain inhabitants lately arrived from St. Domingo are combining to form a military expedition from the territory of the U.S. against the constituted authorities of the [said] island. It is the opinion that the governor of Maryland be informed thereof...and that he be desired to take measures to prevent the same.”¹⁵⁴ In November, a number of refugees, “who from their dress might have been taken for gentlemen,” were alleged to have committed “daring outrages” by attempting to take the life of a French officer as retribution for alleged crimes committed by the man in Saint-Domingue. The city’s mayor, Matthew Clarkson, issued a proclamation, taking the assaulted officer under his protection, and decrying the “insult offered to our laws, by a set of men whom an asylum from fire and sword hath been so recently offered, indicat[ing] the basest ingratitude.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, July 11, 1793.

¹⁵² *General Advertiser*, August 1, 1793.

¹⁵³ See White, 60, and Amit Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xviii-xix.

¹⁵⁴ Cabinet meeting notes, August 5, 1793. *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 15:182. These “inhabitants” seem to have included Saint-Domingue’s exiled military governor, General Galbaud.

¹⁵⁵ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, November 9, 1793.

Citizen Genêt wrote to Jefferson, “I cannot tell you how much I was alarmed...upon learning that a tricolor deputation sent by the free men of the Northern part of St. domingue was scandalously insulted and mistreated upon disembarking at Philadelphia by refugees who were also permitted to remove from onboard a Vessel of the Republic where she was docked official papers addressed to the National Convention and to the Executive Council.”¹⁵⁶ Thomas Jefferson responded to the French minister by assuring him that the refugees’ actions had “excited the indignation and attention of the government, both local and general.”¹⁵⁷ The government would make a “signal example” of these refugees who had disturbed the public order, who were “so capable of insulting the laws of hospitality” and who “violated that protection which the laws of the US., extend to all persons within their pale.”¹⁵⁸ Such persons could not expect the sympathy of their hosts.

The sympathetic and philanthropic efforts of Philadelphians toward the refugees from Saint-Domingue was thus never unequivocal or universal. Generous as Philadelphians may have been, their generosity was tempered by both financial and ideological constraints. That money that had been collected for distribution was earmarked for those refugees who were deemed worthy of it – worthy of the sympathy of the people of Philadelphia. Almost by definition, this did not include non-white people. Over 800 people of color had been brought into the city of Philadelphia from Saint-

¹⁵⁶ Edmond Charles Genêt to Thomas Jefferson, November 19, 1793, 27:404-5. The original reads: “Je ne saurois vous dire combien J’ai été alarmé...en apprenant qu’une députation tricolore envoyée par les hommes libres de la partie du Nord de St. domingue avoit été scandaleusement insultée et maltraitée en débarquant à Philadelphie par des refugiés qui se sont permis même d’enlever à bord de Vaisseau de la République ou elle étoit embarquée des papiers officiels à l’adresse de la Convention nationale et de Conseil exécutif.”

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Edmond Charles Genêt, November 24, 1793, 27:429.

¹⁵⁸ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, November 9, 1793; Thomas Jefferson to Edmond Charles Genêt, November 24, 1793, 27:430.

Domingue – all but 30 of them as slaves. Since the vast majority of people of color arrived as the property of white colonists, they fell outside of the bounds of most white Philadelphians' sympathetic feeling and action. The individual outlays that constituted the majority of refugees' relief would not have been given to enslaved persons.

Many Philadelphians' sympathetic feelings stopped short of aristocrats and propertied refugees. While most thought pity was called for in these cases, such individuals who arrived with the means to support and provide for themselves were expected to do so. As we have seen, Philadelphians' relief efforts in 1793 were directed towards providing the means for refugees to find work, and supporting them (briefly) in the interim. This ideology also excluded the truly destitute from sympathetic action. The Philadelphia relief committee did not countenance the idea that many refugees would have to rely on long-term relief in order to survive in their new cities. Certainly, if they did, this became the purview of Philadelphia's established poor-relief agencies.

When the time came for the federal government to pass judgment on the refugees, they equivocated. Reflecting the beliefs of their constituents, and echoing the language of sympathetic fellow-feeling, members of Congress agreed that something must be done. No one doubted that the refugees' situations demanded pity and charity. But Congress was divided over whether or not it was their responsibility, acting in their capacity as legislators, to assist the men and women who had arrived in their cities. Further, they risked causing an international scandal by offering relief to a group of people who might soon be denounced by their own government, a nation who had been America's ally and benefactor, and was her fellow republic. The only solution at which they could arrive was to provide relief in the form of repayment of wartime debt, and hope that the government

of France would approve. This equivocation and general abdication of responsibility for charity would structure federal responses to other crises. As local systems proved inadequate to the task of providing for the general welfare, Americans looked to Congress and the President to fulfill their Constitutional mandate. When the latter failed to do so in a manner sufficient to please their constituents, wide swaths of the American public would question the political edifice erected just a few years earlier.

In this way, sympathetic feeling and action took place within a variety of contexts in 1790s Philadelphia. While sympathy itself was a dominant ideology of social bonding and social organization in the Federalist period, questions of who was deserving of sympathy and in what contexts reflected other assumptions: assumptions about race, about gender, about work and character, and about the role of the United States in the world. Viewing their responsibility to the refugees who arrived on their shores through these multiple lenses, Philadelphians constructed a response that reflected the social and cultural contexts of the United States at the end of the eighteenth century. However, the discussion was not closed. Debates over who deserved sympathy – and who was responsible for offering it – would come up again as Philadelphia and the United States faced future crises.

CHAPTER III

SYMPATHY AND THE YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC OF 1793

Writing in her diary on August 16, 1793, Elizabeth Drinker noted that “there has been an unusual number of funerals lately here” in Philadelphia. “’Tis a sickly time now,” she declared.¹⁵⁹ On August 23rd, she continued:

[A] fever prevails in the City, perticularly in water-street, between race and arch streets of the malignant kind, numbers have died of it, some say it was occasion’d by damag’d Coffee, and fish...others say it was imported in a Vessel from Cape-Francoies... ‘tis realy an alarming and sereous time.”¹⁶⁰

The situation in Philadelphia would only grow more alarming and more serious. By the end of August, the city was in shambles. Business and schools closed. So many seamen were sick that their ships clogged the harbor and prevented incoming vessels from finding dockage. Mail delivery ceased, and most of the city’s newspapers halted publication. Civil government broke down as the city’s councilmen, aldermen, judges, magistrates, and clerks joined the thousands of refugees streaming out of the city to escape the epidemic. As the disease spread throughout the city during the late summer and early fall of 1793, hundreds of people died each day. The official death toll will never be known, but the list of the dead published by Mathew Carey at the end of the year included more than 5,000 names. Coupled with the estimated 20,000 Philadelphians who fled, the city’s population was reduced by nearly half in the space of a few months.¹⁶¹

In his best-selling account of the yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 1, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 494.

¹⁶⁰ Drinker, 495-6.

¹⁶¹ The most detailed modern narrative of the course and effects epidemic is J.H. Powell’s *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949).

the summer of 1793, publisher Mathew Carey lamented the reversal of fortune that had turned Philadelphians from givers to receivers of charity:

In July, arrived the unfortunate fugitives from Cape François. And on this occasion, the liberality of Philadelphia was displayed in a most respectable point of light. Nearly 12,000 dollars were in a few days collected for their relief. Little, alas ! did many of the contributors, then in easy circumstances, imagine, that a few weeks would leave their wives and children dependent on public charity, as has since unfortunately happened. An awful instance of the rapid and warning vicissitudes of affairs on this transitory stage.¹⁶²

The connections between the arrival of refugees from the Saint-Domingue and the outbreak of yellow fever in their city was obvious to any Philadelphian paying attention in the summer of 1793. Carey declared that the epidemic had “most unquestionably been imported from the West Indies,” though he stopped short of specifically naming the refugees as the source of the infection.¹⁶³ Carey was aware of the existence of yellow fever in the Caribbean islands, and, as J.H. Powell put bluntly, “everyone could see the Santo Domingans.”¹⁶⁴ Elizabeth Drinker’s entry in her diary merely reported what many people in the city were already saying – the refugees from Cape-François had brought yellow fever with them.

As Philadelphia recovered from the epidemic, disparate communities within the city – the emergent middle class, African Americans, and the French refugees – had very real interests in shaping the discussion of how the city had survived the disaster. On the one hand, the social disruption that occurred in consequence of the epidemic had a profound effect on the civic order in Philadelphia. The collapse of regular government in

¹⁶² Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings that Took Place on the Subject, in Different Parts of the United States* 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1794), 11.

¹⁶³ Carey, 67-68.

¹⁶⁴ Powell, 15.

the city of Philadelphia, and the flight of its Federalist leaders, allowed individuals and groups who felt excluded from civic life to argue for a reorganization of the post-Revolutionary body politic, thus making the yellow fever epidemic a unique moment to challenge the limitations of the Federalist political order. Mathew Carey was in an ideal position to do this. As a prominent publisher and author, Carey participated in the growing print culture of eighteenth-century America. His control over the production and distribution of printed materials would have allowed him ready access to a public sphere that Cathy Davidson has described as already enthusiastically engaged in debates like those Carey would use his *Short Account* to enter into. Carey's account of the crisis used the language of republican virtue and benevolent sympathy to argue for the place of white, middling-sort Philadelphians within the reconstituted civic arena of post-epidemic Philadelphia, but he was not alone in his calls for expanding the limits of social inclusion. African-American community leaders Absalom Jones and Richard Allen would use Carey's very account (and his rhetoric) to make their own argument for the inclusion of Philadelphia's black residents. Together, these three prominent Philadelphians would draw upon prevailing discourses of citizenship in eighteenth-century America to expand the affectional framework and ideological limits of social inclusion, using the actions of their respective communities during the epidemic to critique the prevailing social and political order and the dominant ideology of citizenship.¹⁶⁵

However, the French refugee community also waded into this debate. As non-nationals, they were not positioned to claim the political rights of citizenship, but as the

¹⁶⁵ For a very interesting analysis that places the exchange between Carey, Jones, and Allen within the context of anxieties over the transition from republican social organization to one based on the forces of supply-and-demand, see Philip Gould, "Race, Commerce, and the Literature of Yellow Fever in Early National Philadelphia," *Early American Literature* 35:2 (2000), 157-186.

perceived source of the epidemic and as a community still very much dependent upon the sympathy and largesse of their American hosts, Saint-Domingan refugees had a stake in staying within Philadelphians' moral imagination. Dr. Jean Deveze, a refugee doctor from Saint-Domingue who had been appointed director of Philadelphia's Bushhill Infirmary, had experience treating yellow fever in the colony. His published account of the causes of the epidemic took a strongly anti-contagionist stance, placing the origins of the yellow fever in Philadelphia's own atmosphere. Further, Deveze, like Jones and Allen, drew upon discourses of sympathy and civic-mindedness to remind Philadelphians of the contributions made by members of the French community during the fever. There was too much at stake to lose the goodwill of their hosts.

Carey laid the credit for this rebirth on the shoulders of Philadelphians very much like himself – those “men and women, some in the middle, others in the lower spheres of life,” who remained in the city “in the exercise of the duties of humanity,” even after the wealthy had fled.¹⁶⁶ This ethos of civic-minded humanitarianism was best represented for Carey by the eighteen-person relief committee, of which he was a member, which had formed in September 1793 following an appeal from the city's regular poor-relief committee to “benevolent citizens, who actuated by a willingness to contribute their aid in the present distress, will offer themselves as volunteers....”¹⁶⁷ Carey described his fellow volunteers as men “mostly taken from the middle walks of life...whose exertions

¹⁶⁶ Carey, 25. While Carey credits women here, this is the only reference to women as a group that he makes. Sally Griffith has argued that women, like African Americans, appear in Carey's account as *individuals*, because their inclusion as a particular group within society would run counter to Carey's overarching narrative of his fellow middle-class men as the ones responsible for Philadelphia's rebirth. The particular role of women in this crisis is an area that demands fuller study.

¹⁶⁷ *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee, Appointed on the 14th September, 1793, by the Citizens of Philadelphia, the Northern Liberties, and the District of Southwark, to Attend to and Alleviate the Sufferings of the Afflicted with the Malignant Fever, Prevalent in the City and its Vicinity* (Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1848), 7.

have been so highly favoured by providence, that they have been the instruments of averting the progress of destruction, eminently relieving the distressed, and restoring confidence to the terrified inhabitants of Philadelphia.”¹⁶⁸ However, Carey described multiple acts of humanity by middling-sort citizens (and he is careful to make use of the term “citizen”) of Philadelphia. In so doing, he created a rhetorical link between middle-class status, civic-mindedness, and citizenship.

Useful for Carey’s argument about the prominent role of middle-class Philadelphians in guiding the city through the devastation of the fever was the absence of the nation and state’s Federalist leaders from the capital during the epidemic. With the president, his cabinet, most if not all of the other federal officials, as well as Pennsylvania’s Federalist governor and the city’s magistrates absent from Philadelphia during the crisis, the responsibilities of government fell to the city’s mayor, Thomas Clarkson, and to the relief committee: “In fact, government of every kind was almost wholly vacated, and seemed, by tacit, but universal consent, to be vested in the committee.”¹⁶⁹

By placing the mantle of governance on the shoulders of his middling-sort brethren, Carey was making an implicit argument about the qualities of civic participation and citizenship in a young country where political structures were still being contested. He was thus keen to make the rhetorical case for middle class inclusion in the body politic of the young republic. To do so, he drew upon a variety of discursive frameworks of citizenship that circulated in the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world. For as much as Carey emphasized middle-class thrift over aristocratic luxury, he still

¹⁶⁸ Carey, 29-30.

¹⁶⁹ Carey, 30.

drew upon the Federalist ideals of republican citizenship from the foundation of the United States in his descriptions of the actions of middle-class humanitarians during the epidemic. If classical republicanism demanded public virtues gained through the sacrifice of private desires for the public interest, but was suspicious of merchants and others engaged in market-oriented trades,¹⁷⁰ then Carey could advance no greater counter-example than the merchants who made up the relief committee. Sally Griffith argues that the civic-minded humanitarianism of these men bridged the ideological divide between classical republican citizenship and the emerging power of middle-class interests in the United States, achieving a kind of “balance [between] republican ideals and expanding economic activities.”¹⁷¹

Nevertheless, if Carey was to push the boundaries of citizenship outward from the aristocratic ideals of the early republic, then he needed to find a rhetoric of citizenship that could transcend the demarcations of social class. In his descriptions of the actions of middle-class citizens during the epidemic, Carey deployed a mirror rhetoric to that of citizenship as republican virtue: citizenship as sympathetic benevolence.

How could Carey even begin to talk about sociability in a situation where the very instruments and arenas of the public sphere – coffee houses, the city library, and the daily newspapers – ceased to operate during the crisis, when many residents fled the city, and those who remained “avoided each other on the streets, and only signified their regard with a cold nod”?¹⁷² In Philadelphia in the late summer and autumn of 1793, society had

¹⁷⁰ Wood, 104.

¹⁷¹ Sally F. Griffith, “‘A Total Dissolution of the Bonds of Society’: Community Death and Regeneration in Mathew Carey’s *Short Account of the Malignant Fever*,” in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes & Billy G. Smith, 45-59 (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 1997), 54.

¹⁷² Carey, 21-22.

ground to a halt. With the traditional republican structures of government and social organization undone by epidemic disease, the rebuilding of Philadelphia society was undertaken by that band of middle-class heroes who had chosen to stay behind in service to their fellow citizens.

In Carey's account of the course of the epidemic in Philadelphia, community survival parallels individual survival – those individual Philadelphians who maintained their relationships with others were the ones most likely to survive. His publication describes repeated instances of Philadelphians who “perished, without a human being to hand them a drink of water, to administer medicines, or to perform any charitable office for them.”¹⁷³ To some extent, this may reflect the situation of a city in crisis, when “most of those who could by any means make it convenient, fled from the city. Of those who remained, many shut themselves up in their houses, and were afraid to walk the streets.”¹⁷⁴ However, Carey had a larger point to make about sociability and survival. The relief committee which he lauded and held up as a model of civic leadership represents the necessity of maintaining social bonds during times of crisis. The rebirth of Philadelphia can be seen as a reorganization of social bonds along the lines of those created by the members of the relief committee, which had been established once the epidemic itself seemed to have effected “a total dissolution of the bonds of society.”¹⁷⁵ It was Carey's hope that the actions of the committeemen “may encourage others in times of public calamity” – of the twenty-six men appointed, twenty-two headed the call, and only four members died.¹⁷⁶ Carey applauded these men and their actions during the crisis

¹⁷³ Carey, 24.

¹⁷⁴ Carey, 21.

¹⁷⁵ Carey, 23.

¹⁷⁶ Carey, 29.

with reference to Smith's own ideas about sympathy and fellow-feeling:

They enjoy the supreme reward of a self-approving conscience; and I readily believe, that in the most secret recesses, remote from the public eye, they would have done the same. But next to the sense of having done well, is the approbation of our friends and fellow men.... Could I suppose, that in any future equally-dangerous emergency, the opportunity I have seized of bearing my feeble testimony, in favour of these worthy persons, would be a means of exciting others to emulate their heroic virtue, it would afford me the highest consolation I have ever experienced.¹⁷⁷

When order was restored to Philadelphia and the institutions of government and society returned in November, there was no doubt in Carey's mind that it was thanks to the efforts of those middle-class committee members to whom he had given over so much of his account of the crisis in the city. These virtuous, civic-minded leaders had led Philadelphia through a defining crisis, and their leadership when traditional government had failed was evidence enough for the inclusion of the expanding middle class within the boundaries of citizenship.

As telling as whom Carey sought to include, however, is whom he sought to exclude from this rhetorical construction of citizenship. As much as the middle-class publisher may have resented what he saw as the dissolute luxury of wealth, aristocrats are included as much as those of middling rank within Carey's imagined community of sympathy during and after the fever. Carey even went so far as to extend sympathy to the urban poor who had fallen victim to the fever. However, Carey did single out two groups who he did not see as being as affected by the disease: French émigrés (that is, refugees from the French and Haitian revolutions), and Philadelphia's African American community. The extent to which "those French newly arrived in Philadelphia" were

¹⁷⁷ Carey, 26.

exempt from the effects of the yellow fever, Carey supposed, was to some degree the result of their “despising the danger,” or perhaps because of their habit of regular bowel irrigation or of abstaining from American fruit.¹⁷⁸

Whatever the cause of this group’s immunity, the result was that Carey did not see them as fit for inclusion in the community of sympathy he was constructing. On the surface, the French and Saint-Dominguan émigrés’ immunity to the disease contributed more to their alien status than did their foreign origins for the Irish-born publisher. However, Carey knew that the disease itself was foreign in origin, and acknowledged that “this disorder has most unquestionably been imported from the West Indies,” which he argued with reference to the pre-existence of yellow fever in the Caribbean before its transportation to Philadelphia and that “various vessels from those islands arrived here in July.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, while Carey never directly accused the refugees from Saint-Domingue of importing the disease to Philadelphia, it is reasonable to believe that this knowledge contributed to Carey’s exclusion of those refugees from his sympathetic community. Nevertheless, what is most important to Carey’s rhetorical point is the refugees’ perceived immunity from yellow fever.

There was very little that Philadelphia’s French refugee community could do to rebut accusations of immunity to the yellow fever. Recent arrivals from the French colony of Saint-Domingue did not contract or die from the disease at the same rate that their hosts did. However, this immunity could be spun so as to relieve Saint-Domingans of culpability for the arrival of the epidemic in their host city. While Carey believed that

¹⁷⁸ Carey, 62. Carey is careful to distinguish between recent emigrants – like those refugees from the Haitian Revolution – and more settled French emigrants, like Stephen Girard, who was a fellow committee member.

¹⁷⁹ Carey, 67-68.

the refugees' immunity arose from either avoiding infected areas or from regular bathing, Jean Deveze used this immunity to combat the idea that the yellow fever was contagious and that it had been imported into the city at all. In his *An Enquiry into, and Observations Upon the Causes and Effects of the Epidemic Disease*, Deveze asserted, "The first cause of this scourge is the same which produces almost all other diseases, the alterations of the atmospheric air."¹⁸⁰ Deveze posited that, over time, the air in and around Philadelphia had become adulterated, and in so doing, acted on the "animal economy" of the city's residents. Those most susceptible to these changes were the first to contract the disease; those with stronger constitutions may have held off longer or avoided contracting it altogether.¹⁸¹ Deveze uses the immunity of the refugees as proof that the disease had arisen within Philadelphia itself: "This disease, then, was neither brought in by men or vessels; it took rise in the country.... What proves the truth of this assertion is, that very few persons newly arrived were infected with the sickness."¹⁸² In Deveze's analysis, the refugees would not have been in Philadelphia long enough for the atmospheric adulterations to work upon their systems, thus making them generally unsusceptible to infection. He declared, "I did not know one inhabitant refugee from St. Domingo that died of this epidemic."¹⁸³

At the same time, Deveze was quick to extend the hand of sympathy to those Philadelphians who had been affected by the epidemic. He opened his account by declaring:

¹⁸⁰ Jean Deveze, *An Enquiry into, and Observations upon the Causes and Effects of the Epidemic Disease which Raged in Philadelphia from the Month of August till Towards the Middle of December, 1793* (Philadelphia: P. Parent, 1794), 16.

¹⁸¹ Deveze, 20.

¹⁸² Deveze, 36.

¹⁸³ Deveze, 130.

Affectionate wives ! unfortunate mothers and orphans ! your fate overwhelms me with heart-felt distress—Would to heaven I could assuage your sorrows, by accumulating them in my own breast, and thus restore you to the happiness inexorable death has deprived you of, in the objects of your dearest affection, and make you forget your misfortunes. But alas ! my wishes are useless, and there remains to me only the hope, that by fulfilling the duties my profession and humanity require, I may soften your ills by diminishing their number.¹⁸⁴

The French doctor spent a good deal of the introduction to his account reminding Philadelphians of their inherent sensibility, seemingly in an attempt to assuage whatever guilt they may have been experiencing for having “stifled the sacred sentiments Nature has graven in every heart...[forgotten] the first of duties, and [abandoned] to all the bitterness of disease their nearest relations and dearest friends.”¹⁸⁵ In chiding Philadelphians for abandoning the sick and dying in their hour of need, Deveze echoed Carey’s sentiment that individual survival and community survival are linked. However, Deveze declared, “An hospitable and generous people cannot be inhuman...if the exercise of humanity ceased for a moment amongst you, your hearts had no part in it—fear and error are an excuse.”¹⁸⁶ For this, Deveze blamed the city’s newspapers and public officials for spreading the idea that the disease was contagious (and implicitly, French West Indian in origin). Deveze’s account attempted to assuage those fears and correct those errors.

Chief among Deveze’s examples of the incommunicability of the yellow fever is that Stephen Girard never succumbed to the disease. Girard, “merchant of this city, and member of the committee, a man blessed with an affluent fortune...gave way only to the

¹⁸⁴ Deveze, 8.

¹⁸⁵ Deveze, 8.

¹⁸⁶ Deveze, 10.

generous dictates of humanity.”¹⁸⁷ It was Girard who had overseen the conversion of the Bushhill estate into an emergency quarantine and infirmary at the outset of the epidemic, and who had secured Deveze’s appointment as director. Girard also happened to be a French-born naturalized citizen of the United States with extensive ties to the West Indies (he had joined his father on cruises there as a youth, and his brother had fled to Philadelphia from Saint-Domingue). Deveze lauded Girard’s hands-on ministrations to patients at Bushhill: “Oh ! you, who pretend to philanthropy, reflect upon the indefatigable Girard ! take him for your model, and profit by his lessons ; and you, citizens of Philadelphia, may the name Girard be ever dear to you !”¹⁸⁸ Girard’s exposure to the fever in the infirmary would have made him extremely susceptible to infection, and yet he did not succumb, “from which we may reasonably conclude it was not contagious, unless we are to think, that by the peculiar grace of divine providence he was preserved to serve as a model for others.”¹⁸⁹

However, Deveze very much meant for Girard to serve as a model for others. First, Girard was a model of someone who had not contracted the disease despite spending large amounts of time in close quarters with infected persons, a fact which Deveze used to underscore his larger point that the disease was not contagious and therefore not foreign in origin. Secondly, Girard was a model of the civic-mindedness and sympathetic benevolence of Philadelphia’s French expatriate community. As a member of the relief committee established to deal with the crisis, Girard was a representative example of Mathew Carey’s ideal citizen. That he was of French

¹⁸⁷ Deveze, 24-26.

¹⁸⁸ Deveze, 28.

¹⁸⁹ Deveze, 28.

extraction was particularly useful for Deveze, a refugee from the French West Indies who needed not only to refute the idea that his fellow refugees were the cause of the epidemic, but find some way to maintain this community within the limits of sympathetic community. Thus, French Philadelphians were not only recipients of benevolence, they were themselves benevolent members of the community.

Like for the refugees from Saint-Domingue, the perceived immunity of Philadelphia's African Americans to yellow fever also placed them outside of the community of sympathy that Carey was attempting to construct. Carey devoted more space to the city's residents of color than to the French, but not terribly much more, and the content of his description makes it clear that Carey saw no room for black citizens in his expanded conception of citizenship. While Carey admitted that African Americans "did not escape the disorder, there were scarcely any of them seized at first, and the number that were finally affected, was not great."¹⁹⁰ On the one hand, this perceived immunity – a belief initially held in both the white and black communities – provided an opportunity for Philadelphia's black residents to come to the aid of the city's whites, for "had the negroes been equally terrified, the sufferings of the sick, great as they actually were, would have been exceedingly aggravated."¹⁹¹

On the other hand, Carey related that the demand for caregivers during the epidemic "afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of the blacks."¹⁹² He recounted examples of African Americans extorting outrageous sums in return for nursing sick whites, or plundering the homes of those white

¹⁹⁰ Carey, 63.

¹⁹¹ Carey, 63.

¹⁹² Carey, 63.

Philadelphians who had fled at the outset of the crisis. Carey did not wish to censure the entire African American population of Philadelphia for the actions of a few, for “the services of [Absalom] Jones, [Richard] Allen, and [William] Gray, and others of their colour, have been very great, and demand public gratitude.”¹⁹³ Nevertheless, he concluded this account by noting that only twenty African Americans were received at the city’s Bushhill infirmary, and fewer than three-quarters of those died.¹⁹⁴ This perceived immunity was enough to exclude African Americans from this community of sympathy, for, as Julia Stern argues,

In the racist psychic economy of post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, to be thought ‘immune’ means to be seen as living beyond the pale of the human community, to be excluded from the circle of sympathy that identifies white Philadelphians as brethren in common affliction.¹⁹⁵

Carey’s account of African Americans’ actions during the epidemic was challenged by exactly those individual community leaders whom he had selected for special commendation in his *Short Account*: Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. Both men had been born into slavery (Jones in Delaware, Allen in Philadelphia) and had bought their freedom. Together they had been lay ministers for the interracial congregation of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, and together they would go on to establish the first black mutual-aid society and first black church in the city in the 1780s and 1790s. As leaders of Philadelphia’s black community, they published their own account of the course of the epidemic with special attention to members of their own racial community, entitled *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late*

¹⁹³ Carey, 63.

¹⁹⁴ Carey, 63.

¹⁹⁵ Stern, 222.

Awful Calamity in Philadelphia. Jones and Allen wished to provide a fuller account than had Carey of the experience of the African American community during the outbreak of yellow fever, but they desired especially to refute what they saw as Carey's censorious portrayal of their brethren's actions. Further, in portraying the actions of civic- and humanitarian-minded black Philadelphians, Jones and Allen echoed the rhetoric of citizenship employed by Carey in his account, for much the same reason – their *Narrative* is an implicit argument for the inclusion of African Americans within the imagined community of sympathy that Carey had constructed to define the parameters of citizenship in post-epidemic Philadelphia.

According to the two community leaders, African Americans came to the aid of the white residents of Philadelphia, “sensible that it was our duty to do all the good we could to our suffering fellow mortals.”¹⁹⁶ In arguing that African Americans’ “services were the production of real sensibility” and that they had initially “sought not fee nor reward”, Jones and Allen constructed an image of the African American community beyond just themselves as motivated by the same selfless, civic-minded and sympathetic impulses that had motivated Carey's middle-class committeemen in the midst of the crisis.¹⁹⁷ The danger they saw in Carey's distinction between the actions of African American community leaders and of those he accused of profiting from the crisis was that Carey neglected to consider the contributions of a range of poor and middling-sort black residents of the city: “By naming us, he leaves these others, in the hazardous state of

¹⁹⁶ Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of the Censures, Thrown upon them in some late Publications* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1794), 3

¹⁹⁷ Jones and Allen, 4.

being classed with those who are called the ‘vilest.’”¹⁹⁸ Further, inclusion of the actions of the African American community (and not just of African American individuals) within his larger account would have undermined Carey’s argument that Philadelphia’s rebirth was the result of the actions of a particular class of residents, those white men who were able to participate fully in public life during the crisis.¹⁹⁹ Thus, in much the same way that Carey argued for white middle-class inclusion within the boundaries of citizenship, Jones and Allen feared that a narrow focus on the most prominent members of Philadelphia’s African American community would exclude not just middle- and lower-rank black residents, but the whole of their community, from citizenship organized around an imagined community of sympathy.

Jones and Allen thus filled their *Narrative* with instances of black Philadelphians from all walks of life responding to the call to assist their white neighbors – in nursing the sick and in burying the dead as they had been called upon to do by the white government of Philadelphia, but also in other instances where individual African Americans acted on their humanitarian impulses. Jones and Allen provided the stories of these “affecting instances” to which Philadelphia’s black residents responded, when they encountered white children attempting to rouse their dead parents, white men turning sick women out of their homes, widows and orphans abandoned by the white community. They were times when the situations these African American nurses and hearse-drivers encountered left them “so wounded and our feelings so hurt, that we almost concluded to withdraw from our undertaking, but seeing others so backward, we still went on.”²⁰⁰ In

¹⁹⁸ Jones and Allen, 12-13.

¹⁹⁹ Griffith, 54-55.

²⁰⁰ Jones and Allen, 18.

attesting to the ability of their African American constituents to psychologically identify with suffering white Philadelphians, to have their feelings wounded by the scenes they encountered and still to come to the aid of their white brethren, Jones and Allen were arguing for African American inclusion within the ideological limits of sympathetic citizenship, based on the very same criteria Carey uses to make the case for middle-class citizenship. Julia Stern argues,

Reaching across the divide of race, class, and citizenship that polarizes fever-stricken Philadelphia in manichean fashion, splitting the population into natives and aliens, comrades in suffering and exiles from communal fellowship, these anonymous African Americans extend the bond of sympathy to a white community that disavows their status as brethren.²⁰¹

Further, Jones and Allen sought to dispel the myth of African American immunity from yellow fever, and to show “that as many coloured people died in proportion as others.”²⁰² The two men recorded 67 people of color buried in Philadelphia in the year before the epidemic, and a total of 305 buried in 1793.²⁰³ If Philadelphia’s black residents suffered and died alongside their white neighbors, this was all the more reason to extend to them inclusion within a community of suffering. African Americans had been moved by the suffering of Philadelphia’s whites; it was time that the latter return “the bond of sympathy,” and include black Philadelphians in Carey’s imagined community of sympathy.

But Jones and Allen were not content to stop there. As well as demonstrating examples of black Philadelphians’ virtue and humanity, the two men wanted to

²⁰¹ Stern, 231-232.

²⁰² Jones and Allen, 15.

²⁰³ Jones and Allen, 15.

demonstrate the inhumanity of some of Philadelphia's white residents, especially poor whites. For black residents of the United States, even those living in a state transitioning out of slavery, to challenge and criticize the white community around them was a bold – and potentially dangerous – step. Jones and Allen recognized this, but the honor and future of the community they spoke for depended on dispelling the racist portrayal of that community:

We wish not to offend, but when an unprovoked attempt is made, to make us blacker than we are, it becomes less necessary to be over cautious on that account; therefore we shall take the liberty to tell of the conduct of some of the whites.²⁰⁴

What followed was a list of examples of white Philadelphians engaged in the same acts which Carey had accused the African American community of the city of perpetrating. The authors lamented that “it is unpleasant to point out the bad and unfeeling conduct of any colour, yet the defence we have undertaken obliges us...”²⁰⁵ This defense of the position of Philadelphia's black community – from racist attacks, possibly inspired by Carey's *Short Account*, from “unprovoked enemies, who begrudge us the liberty we enjoy, and are glad to hear of any complaint against out colour, be it just or unjust”²⁰⁶ – is an early self-description of a free black community in the United States. According to Phillip Lapsansky, this is the first African American polemic in which black leaders sought to articulate black community anger and directly confront an accuser.²⁰⁷ Jones and Allen asked, “Is it a greater crime for a black to pilfer, than for a white to privateer?”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Jones and Allen, 8-9.

²⁰⁵ Jones and Allen, 8.

²⁰⁶ Jones and Allen, 13.

²⁰⁷ Phillip Lapsansky, “‘Abigail, a Negress’: The Role and Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic,” in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes & Billy G. Smith, 61-78 (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 1997), 61.

²⁰⁸ Jones and Allen, 8.

The two men had a point. If citizenship was going to be based upon participation within a community of sympathy, then Jones and Allen wanted to make the case that not all whites demonstrated the benevolent and public-spirited inclinations that Carey thought qualified one for inclusion. If that was the case, then the logic for the exclusion of the entire African American community of Philadelphia collapsed – inclusion within the community of sympathy that Carey had constructed in his *Short Account* had to be colorblind. If the increasingly-democratic orientations of sympathetic social bonds were to be the new foundations of society and government – indeed, the very basis for American identity – then the leaders of Philadelphia’s community of free blacks wanted to ensure that the limits of social inclusion would not stop at race.

In the short run, Jones and Allen and the community they represented would be stymied in their quest for social inclusion and citizenship. Nevertheless, the contest over these ideas would continue to remain at the heart of American society and politics long after their *Narrative* was published. At the center of this contest would be the twin strands of republican virtue and sentimental fellow-feeling. Sentimental ideology “casts ‘republican virtue,’ and the disinterested benevolence associated with it, as inseparable from the sympathetic mechanisms that bind a people together. These mechanisms ultimately rely on an understanding of the feeling self as the foundation of democratic society.”²⁰⁹

Race would prove to be a constant challenge in constructing sympathetic community, and the color of a person or group’s skin continued to place them outside of the moral imagination of white Philadelphians. One group in particular was especially

²⁰⁹ Barnes, 18.

stymied by the seeming insurmountability of the gulf between differences of race and bonds of sympathetic community: black Saint-Domingan refugees. Hundreds of enslaved people of African descent had been brought from the colony to Philadelphia by their masters and mistresses as they fled the slave insurrection. Once in the city, these individuals were not granted the same reception as the whites who had brought them. Separated from the normal mechanisms of benevolence by their race, culture, and status as slaves, black Saint-Domingans found themselves outside of the moral imagination of sympathetic Philadelphians, white or black. How these people were received by Philadelphia abolitionists and the wider community would show fundamental gaps in sympathetic ideology – gaps that had appeared during the yellow fever epidemic in response to free black Philadelphians, but that would only grow wider as French slaves sought freedom and inclusion in their new city.

CHAPTER IV

SYMPATHY AND SLAVERY: PHILADELPHIA'S RESPONSE TO BLACK SAINT-DOMINGANS

In January 1795, Benjamin Rush, a secretary of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, wrote to the organization on behalf of the American Convention of Abolition Societies, whose biennial meeting had just concluded in Philadelphia. His letter relates to the Pennsylvanian delegation the recommendations that were put forward. As the first and leading anti-slavery society in the United States, Rush hoped that the Pennsylvania group would be willing to take charge of certain initiatives which had been proposed. Among these was an investigation into the status of certain persons who, "By a decree of the national Convention of France...are declared free," but who had "been brought from the West india Islands as emigrants into the United States; and are now held as slaves." Ultimately, he charged the Pennsylvania Abolition Society with securing the freedom of these individuals, "so far as many be found consistent with the laws of your State."²¹⁰

This is a curious letter. The members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society were no doubt already aware of the existence within their city of slaves brought as refugees from the revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Two years earlier, they had successfully lobbied the state legislature against exempting French refugee slaveholders from the state's abolition laws. The society had also recorded the manumission of several dozen French-owned slaves since 1791. Nevertheless, the members voted to create a committee "to take into consideration the Case of those Blacks in america, who being entitled to the benefit of the Decree of the National Convention of France, giving

²¹⁰ The Constitution and Minutes of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1787-1800. Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Reel I Series 1, pp. 237-238.

freedom to the Blacks, are nevertheless detained in Bondage.”²¹¹

The letter also presents a second curiosity. Rush stated that these slaves were free under the laws of France, and were thus “entitled to an equal participation of the rights of citizens of France.”²¹² The National Convention of France had abolished slavery throughout the empire in February 1794, confirming the decree of emancipation promulgated by the civilian commissioners of Saint-Domingue in August 1793. However, Rush ends that paragraph by instructing the society to secure the manumission of these enslaved persons so far as the laws of Pennsylvania allowed. Slaves brought into the state prior to 1793 were freed under Pennsylvania’s 1780 gradual emancipation law, which mandated that any slave brought into the state be manumitted after six months of residence. While these individuals may have been free under French law – indeed, even made citizens of the French Republic – Rush pushed only for their freedom under the laws of Pennsylvania. This ambiguity in the status of French slaves in an American free state would persist throughout Philadelphia’s response to their presence. Slaves from Saint-Domingue did not fit comfortably within the established legal framework that governed issues of freedom and citizenship in Pennsylvania. Altogether, their color, their nationality, and their status placed them outside of the normal sympathetic community of post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, and created a moral ambiguity that structured the city’s approach to dealing with their arrival.

Over 800 enslaved persons of African descent had accompanied the white refugees who fled the revolution in Saint-Domingue and came to Philadelphia. The reasons for their following their masters into exile instead of remaining to join the slave

²¹¹ Constitution and Minutes, 238.

²¹² Constitution and Minutes, 237.

rebellion and win their freedom has been much discussed. Frances Sergeant Childs argued that such slaves were loyal enough to their masters that they preferred exile to freedom.²¹³ Gary Nash's demographic analysis of the slaves who arrived in Philadelphia between 1790 and 1794 suggests that their age composition and family structure belies this argument. Most of these enslaved individuals were children and young adults, and few families were brought to Philadelphia intact. Nash argues that the available evidence suggests that whatever slaves were brought from Saint-Domingue were those who could be easily wrested aboard departing ships.²¹⁴ Sue Peabody has argued that Nash's analysis omits the racial characteristics of refugee slaves. She suggests that if the slaves who were brought to Philadelphia included a large number of people of mixed racial heritage, then fleeing whites may have been bringing their concubines and children.²¹⁵ A combination of coercion and loyalty no doubt compelled those slaves who quit the island to give up the possibility for effective freedom in Saint-Domingue and join their masters in Philadelphia. Once in the city, however, the opportunities available to win their freedom did not vanish.

Under Pennsylvania's 1780 "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery", slaves brought into the state were required to be manumitted after six months of residence. Slaveholding refugees faced the loss of their human property after having just fled a slave rebellion. Their slaves, however, stood the chance of winning their freedom. In late 1792, before even the largest wave of refugees had arrived in the city, a group of Saint-

²¹³ Francis Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1800* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 56.

²¹⁴ Gary Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti in the American North: Black Saint Domingans in Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 63(1998), 52-53.

²¹⁵ Sue Peabody, "Free Upon Higher Ground": Saint-Domingue Slaves' Suits for Freedom in U.S. Courts, 1792-1830," *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. David Patrick Geggus & Norman Fiering (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 263.

Domingan slaveholders submitted a petition to the Pennsylvania legislature to exempt them from the state's abolition law. The committee to which the petition was referred were sympathetic to the white refugees, but their sympathy was balanced by the dictates of the law and of their sense of justice. They responded that while they "lament the calamities to which the petitioners have been exposed, and sympathize in their present distress; while they are sensible that as men, flying for refuge to our country, they have claims on our humanity and hospitality," they could not however "feel themselves justified in recommending... a dispensation of a Law which appears to have originated not from principles susceptible of change or modification, but from the sacred and immutable obligations of justice and natural right." Arguing that slavery was "unlawful in itself, and... repugnant to our Constitution," they returned the petition with the recommendation that the petitioners withdraw it.²¹⁶ Competing claims of sympathy were at play. While white Saint-Domingans demanded sympathy because of their status as "distressed" refugees, their slaves were not exempt from the legislators' considerations, or from the considerations of other white Philadelphians.

Philadelphia's abolitionists had "strenuously exerted" themselves in lobbying against the Saint-Domingan slaveholders' petition.²¹⁷ With the state's emancipation law intact, the PAS continued their mission of securing the freedom of slaves in Pennsylvania and advocating for the abolition of slavery. The society had been founded in 1775 (and revived in 1784) on a revolutionary-era universalist notion of the inherent dignity of all humans and of the unnaturalness of the institution of slavery. This ideology reflected the

²¹⁶ William J. Buck, *MS History of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society*, 95-95. Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers. History Society of Pennsylvania. Series I.

²¹⁷ Constitution and Minutes, 179.

members' investments in both Enlightenment rationalism and universalist religion.²¹⁸ The ideological roots of the PAS's abolitionism stretched back to seventeenth-century Quaker antislavery thought. The egalitarian and libertarian rhetoric of the American Revolution validated Quakers' beliefs in the inherent dignity of both whites and blacks, and motivated them to press for the complete abolition of slavery in America.²¹⁹ Further, the destruction of the Revolutionary War convinced Philadelphia Quakers of the wages of sin and of the need to purge society of its iniquities.²²⁰ With the foundation of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Philadelphia Quakers and their allies transformed an antislavery ideology into a systematic program from the gradual elimination of slavery.

This program was based on the prevailing assumptions about political action in 1790s Pennsylvania. In the post-Revolutionary period, as one of many benevolent institutions to spring up in Philadelphia after the end of the war, the PAS would reflect the dominant social emphasis on civic virtue and activism by enlightened and elite men.²²¹ The society had begun as a core group of established (but middling-rank) artisans, shopkeepers, manufacturers, and smaller merchants. However, these middling-sort abolitionists believed that the success of their project depended upon gaining the support of well-placed civic leaders who had access to the political and legal institutions of the city and the state.²²² The PAS's mission was centered around using the tools and authority of government to undo bondage, and on doing so in a conservative, gradual

²¹⁸ Richard Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the Struggle for Racial Justice," *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 121.

²¹⁹ Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society," 121.

²²⁰ Gary B. Nash & Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 114.

²²¹ Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society," 124.

²²² Nash & Soderlund, 124; Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 21.

manner. It shunned overzealous and fevered public campaigns against slavery as a threat to the reasoned and dispassionate approach its members felt would be less likely to provoke proslavery backlash.²²³ In the 1780s, the group's tactical arsenal was limited to legal work and petitioning. The PAS petitioned the state and federal governments on specific issues arising from the institution of slavery, such as the domestic slave trade. Litigation was used to secure the freedom of kidnapped free African Americans, runaways, and slaves who masters failed to register them under the requirements of the state's emancipation law.²²⁴

By the 1790s, the group had opened a second front in its campaign against slavery. In 1787, the PAS had expanded its mission to promote the abolition of slavery in general.²²⁵ In participating in national and international networks of abolitionists, the Pennsylvania society considered itself and its state as vanguards in a global movement that would eventually undo slavery throughout the Atlantic world. By reaching throughout the United States and across the Atlantic, the PAS pushed the limits of benevolent community beyond Philadelphia. The transatlantic communication networks they helped to establish conveyed the sense that such a community could be transnational and potentially boundless.²²⁶

Part of this mission involved the transmission and dissemination of antislavery materials and ideas through the US and the Atlantic world. From the early days of the Haitian Revolution, members of the PAS had followed it closely. At a September 1792

²²³ Newman, *Transformation*, 27.

²²⁴ Newman, *Transformation*, 25-26.

²²⁵ Nash & Soderlund, 124.

²²⁶ James Alexander Dun, "Philadelphia not Philanthropolis: The Limits of Pennsylvania Antislavery in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135:1 (2011), 79.

meeting, the society's Committee of Correspondence reported that they had received from London a pamphlet entitled "An Inquiry into the Causes of the Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingo", and had ordered 500 copies to be printed and distributed in Philadelphia.²²⁷ This tract reflected the PAS's general approval of the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue. One member had lauded the slaves in the French colony as "brave sons of Africa, engaged in a noble conflict...bravely sacrificing their lives on the altar of liberty."²²⁸ In general, the violence of slave revolution would have seemed to contradict the PAS's conservative approach to emancipation. However, the pamphlet insisted that the cause of the uprising was the French government's *failure* to interfere in the institution of slavery in its colonies, and to effect a plan of gradual emancipation.²²⁹ From Philadelphia abolitionists' perspective in 1792, Saint-Domingue's slaves had actuated the ideological foundations upon which international antislavery rested.

Despite their recognition of slavery as a transnational problem, the PAS was still a movement firmly grounded in local institutions.²³⁰ It was these local institutions upon which the organization relied in dealing with the effects of the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue within their own community. The organization had been emboldened by the Pennsylvania legislature's declaration that slavery was contrary to the Constitution of the state. Immediately following the rejection of the refugees' petition, the PAS lobbied the legislature to pass a general and immediate abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania. The legislature considered such a bill in the summer of 1793, only to disband in the face of

²²⁷ Constitution and Minutes. September 7, 1792, 174.

²²⁸ David Rice, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy*, 9. Quoted in Dun, 87.

²²⁹ Newman, *Transformation*, 27.

²³⁰ Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society," 125.

the yellow fever epidemic.²³¹ In 1794, the PAS took a case to the Supreme Court to have black indentured servants' terms reduced to the same as those for white indentured servants – until age 21 for males, and 18 for females. They had had success in convincing white Philadelphians to follow these terms, but white Saint-Domingans proved resistant. Ultimately, this bid proved unsuccessful as well.²³²

Their petitioning campaign stymied, the PAS turned to litigation to find solutions to the crisis of refugee Saint-Domingan slaves. Following the French government's decree of general liberty in February 1794, the PAS was intrigued by its utility in confronting the issue of French slaves in Philadelphia, but its members were unsure of the decree's specifics, and hesitant to use it until they understood it fully. Further, the PAS had an established history of winning freedom for slaves (both American and French) based upon Pennsylvania's own gradual emancipation law. The legal groundwork for emancipation was already laid in Pennsylvania, in large part thanks to the activity of the PAS itself (their lobbying efforts had secured amendments to the emancipation law in 1788 that closed certain loopholes).²³³ The use of the French government's decree of general liberty would find traction later, in soil where the foundations for emancipation had not yet been laid.²³⁴

In Philadelphia, the PAS continued to think globally and act locally. Soon after the conclusion of the 1795 Philadelphia antislavery convention, Lawrence Embree, a New York abolitionist, wrote to the PAS that he had encountered the French Minister in

²³¹ Nash, 54.

²³² Nash, 56.

²³³ Nash & Soderlund, 127.

²³⁴ Peabody, 265. Peabody identifies successful legal suits based upon this decree beginning in the first decade of the 19th century, in states like Louisiana, Tennessee, and Maryland, where slavery was legally established.

New York City, and had put to him the questions that American abolitionists had about the decree: What was the date of the decree? Was it applicable to persons brought to the United States in bondage after its passage? Before? To this, the French ambassador responded that the decree was general, and intended to free all slaves in the French territories. However, he was unsure whether or not it was applicable to French slaves brought to the United States before its passage, and in any case, “he could not immediately enforce it in this Neutral Country.”²³⁵ About a month after the conclusion of the convention, the PAS wrote for a certified copy of the decree, attesting to the presence in Philadelphia of individuals whom they believed to be free under the terms of the decree, and who were in danger of being claimed as property. They hoped that having the decree as evidence would be enough to convince certain slaveholders to manumit their slaves.²³⁶ Their search was fruitless however, until Benjamin Giroud, a French plantation owner and member of *Les Amis des Noirs*, provided them with a copy in 1797.²³⁷ In April of that year, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, one of the Commissioners of Saint-Domingue, sent the PAS a certified copy of his August 1793 order of emancipation.²³⁸ The PAS would use these documents as partners with Pennsylvania’s own laws in the quest to secure the freedom of French slaves brought into the city.

James Dun has argued that limiting their antislavery activities to a more parochial focus on Pennsylvania in the wake of the French government’s decree represented an ideological shift in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s approach to abolitionism. He

²³⁵ *Pennsylvania Abolition Society Committee of Correspondence Letter Book, 1794-1809*. Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers. History Society of Pennsylvania. Series II Reel 11 pp. 10-11.

²³⁶ PAS Committee of Correspondence Letter Book, 1794-1809. 13-14.

²³⁷ Dun, 91.

²³⁸ PAS Committee of Correspondence Letter Book, 1794-1809. 51-52.

writes that, by accepting the “utilitarian and pragmatic” response of focusing on French slaves in Pennsylvania instead of using the decree in a global campaign of emancipation, the PAS retreated from the more cosmopolitan aspects of their earlier antislavery activities.²³⁹ However, the PAS had always had local concerns. Focusing on the manumission of slaves in Pennsylvania was not necessarily a deviation from earlier, more global concerns, but a re-emphasis of the society’s original mission in the light of a large number of enslaved persons recently arrived in the city who were subject to various laws that provided for their freedom. The PAS was compelled to find out whether Saint-Domingan slaves in Philadelphia *were* being unlawfully held in bondage.

The records of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society between 1791 and 1804 document the manumissions of 659 of the 816 refugee slaves brought to Philadelphia.²⁴⁰ The PAS would record a noticeable increase in the numbers of French slaves being manumitted following the 1795 Philadelphia antislavery convention. From less than 75 refugee slaves manumitted between 1791 and 1794, more than 150 would be manumitted in 1795 alone.²⁴¹ In part, this represents the surge of refugees – both black and white – who arrived in the city following the burning of Cap-Français in the summer of 1793. As more and more enslaved Saint-Domingans arrived in Philadelphia in the middle of the 1790s, the PAS continued to advocate for their manumission.

However, only 45 of those manumitted received their freedom outright. Under the terms of Pennsylvania’s abolition law, slaveholders could indenture their manumitted slaves until their twenty-eighth birthday, or for up to seven years if the individual was

²³⁹ Dun, 91.

²⁴⁰ Nash, 51.

²⁴¹ Manumission Books B and C. PAS Papers.

over the age of 21. The slave's consent to the terms of indenture was necessary under the emancipation law, or else they could go free immediately. The vast numbers of slaves who agreed to be indentured for the fullest term allowable under the law indicates that either they were not aware of this right, were under enormous pressure from their masters, or could not see another way forward in a new city in which they likely did not speak the language or know the culture. Cash-strapped refugee slave owners could also sell these indentures in order to provide solvency if necessary. Thus, freed Saint-Domingan slaves were not technically free.²⁴² Given the age breakdown of the refugee slaves (the median age for males was 14.1, for females 15.5) their masters could retain their service for a considerable amount of time.²⁴³

Gary Nash surmises that indentured former slaves bore their indentures fitfully. His analysis of the post-manumission lives of Saint-Domingan people of color found their names littered throughout the vagrancy and prisoners for trial dockets in Philadelphia – brought up on charges of insubordination, flight from service, or property theft.²⁴⁴ When indentured ex-slaves challenged the conditions of their servitude, white Saint-Domingan masters and mistresses compensated for the loss of complete legal authority over their subordinates by turning them over to Philadelphia's established legal system.²⁴⁵ Black restiveness became a highly pertinent issue in Philadelphia politics because of the influx of black refugees. Observers in Philadelphia began to link black

²⁴² Nash, 55.

²⁴³ Nash, 50.

²⁴⁴ Nash, 56-57.

²⁴⁵ Susan Branson & Leslie Patrick, "Étrangers dans un Pays Étrange: Saint-Domingan Refugees of Color in Philadelphia," *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David P. Geggus (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 201. The authors indicate that this was especially true of female slaveholders, though can only speculate as to why this might have been the case. They suggest that single white women may have had more difficulty controlling their ex-slaves.

assertiveness to the Haitian Revolution, especially after a series of instances of arson swept up and down the East coast.²⁴⁶

In the period after the revolution, most white Americans operated under the assumption (or rhetorical shield) that slavery would eventually die a natural death. As much as Philadelphia abolitionists sought to present themselves as felicitous insiders, they were labeled by their opponents as “fanatics” for attempting to bring about too quickly an end that would occur naturally if sometime in the distant future.²⁴⁷ While the PAS and its supporters had initially championed the revolution in Saint-Domingue as divine proof of the consequences of slavery, the opponents of abolitionism argued that it was the result of meddling with the social order. For years, white refugees had been making the case that the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue was the result of the “misguided philanthropy” of French abolitionists and their supporters.²⁴⁸ For many white refugees from the French West Indies, as well as for American observers, the political and social tumult of the French Revolution – the execution of the king, de-Christianization, the violence of the Terror – was the result of an excess of sensibility, a runaway effort at total social transformation.²⁴⁹ Adopting too immediate a program of emancipation put Philadelphia – embracing too closely the slave rebellion in the Caribbean – put the United States in danger of suffering the same turmoil as was occurring throughout the French Empire.

Therefore, while many Philadelphians – and especially members of the

²⁴⁶ Nash, 61.

²⁴⁷ Dun, 98.

²⁴⁸ Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 78.

²⁴⁹ Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 272.

Pennsylvania Abolition Society – had fully embraced black revolution in its early stages, in the wake of the Haitian Revolution’s violence and amidst fears of racial violence at home, white Philadelphians began to disavow black independence.²⁵⁰ The presence in their city of large numbers of Saint-Domingan slaves was central to white Philadelphians’ fears of becoming the victims of a racial uprising. When Richard Allen and Absalom Jones submitted a petition to Congress in 1799 to completely and immediately abolish slavery throughout the United States, Congressmen from both the northern and southern states reacted with vehemence, often holding up the refugees from Saint-Domingue as proof of the dangers of such a foolhardy rush to liberty.²⁵¹

Connected to this fear of French slaves was that fact that these enslaved Saint-Domingans had arrived in Philadelphia during a period in which the city’s black population was on the increase, tripling in the last decade of the eighteenth century from 2,000 to over 6,500.²⁵² Under the gradual emancipation law, the number of slaves in the city had fallen to less than 400.²⁵³ As Philadelphia’s slaves gained their freedom under the emancipation law, they were joined by free people of color from surrounding areas and neighboring states who recognized Philadelphia as a center of free black life and culture in the United States. Philadelphia’s African American community was burgeoning. For white Philadelphians worried about the contagion of black insurrection, the proximity of so many free former slaves was worrisome.

Despite the prominence of Philadelphia’s free black community, there are no documented efforts by the established black leaders of the city to come to the aid of

²⁵⁰ Nash, 61.

²⁵¹ Branson & Patrick, 198.

²⁵² Nash, 62.

²⁵³ Branson & Patrick, 195.

French slaves. An oft-quoted anecdote describes how the influx of refugees from Saint-Domingue influenced the development of Philadelphia's black freedom struggle. In 1793, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones had been working for two years to raise the funds to build an African Church in the city, and had managed to raise only about \$3,500. With the arrival of refugees from the French West Indies, many prominent white Philadelphians reneged on their promise of support for Allen and Jones and diverted funds to the relief of white refugees. Further, white Philadelphians raised in a matter of days for these distressed whites quadruple the sum of money – \$14,000 – that the black leaders had spent years collecting.²⁵⁴ Despite this inauspicious start, refugee slaves' chances for gaining their freedom depending upon their ability to gain the support of free African Americans and the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society. Doing so, however, required surmounting the barriers of culture, language, and age – a challenge that often proved too much to overcome.²⁵⁵

The relationship between free African Americans and white Pennsylvania abolitionists was complex. From its inception, the PAS was a whites-only organization. However, many black Philadelphians worked with the organization because white Philadelphians could take black complaints to places the latter could not themselves take them – courts of law and state legislatures. To aid them in this task, prominent African Americans like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones provided to white abolitionists the local knowledge of conditions within the black community that the PAS needed to push its broader agenda of emancipation and black uplift. This symbiotic interracial

²⁵⁴ Nash, 44-45; Branson & Patrick, 196.

²⁵⁵ Nash 53.

relationship was both idealistic and expedient.²⁵⁶

By the end of the eighteenth century, Northern black abolitionists were developing their own style of advocacy for the end of slavery. Unlike white Philadelphians' dispassionate and conservative approach to antislavery, black abolitionist rhetoric was couched in emotional and moralistic language. Whereas white Philadelphians focused on changing the *minds* of the state's legislators and judges, black abolitionists wanted to stir the *feelings* of a broader public audience.²⁵⁷ Unable to reach into courtrooms and legislative assemblies, black abolitionists used the public sphere to make their case against slavery and racial injustice. Pamphleteering was an essential part of this agenda.²⁵⁸ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones had used this tactic in the wake of the yellow fever epidemic in 1793, and black essayists and polemicists would use the tools of publication to reach white audiences, developing a distinct tradition of black protest literature.²⁵⁹

In 1797, free black Massachusetts abolitionist Prince Hall delivered a charge to the members of the African Masonic Lodge in West Cambridge, calling on them to “remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren six years ago, in the French West Indies... but blessed be the scene has now changed.”²⁶⁰ The Haitian Revolution certainly had a place in the political consciousness of black Americans from its inception. Nevertheless, black Philadelphians remained largely silent on the issue of Saint-Domingue until well after independence was secured in 1804. An episode of interracial

²⁵⁶ Newman, “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society,” 133.

²⁵⁷ Newman, *Transformation*, 87.

²⁵⁸ New, *Transformation*, 89.

²⁵⁹ The best examples of this can be found in the edited volume *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860*, ed. Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, & Phillip Lapsansky (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁶⁰ Prince Hall, “‘A Charge’ (1797),” *Pamphlets of Protest*, 47.

violence occurred during Philadelphia's July 4th celebration following Haiti's independence, in which black Philadelphians organized a countercelebration to white Philadelphians' Independence Day festivities. According to newspaper reports, these demonstrators attacked whites whom they encountered on the street, even entering a white home and subjecting its inhabitants to "rough treatment." The following day, they marched again, threatening to any white person who came near them that "they would shew them St. Domingo."²⁶¹ The makeup of this group of protestors is not known, nor is it clear to what extent their invocation of racial violence in Saint-Domingue is a product of their own aspirations for liberation or of white reporters' fears. In any case, the leaders of Philadelphia's free black community made no public declaration regarding the hundreds of enslaved people of African descent who were brought into their city during the revolution in Saint-Domingue.

Eventually, most of the slaves who were brought from Saint-Domingue to Philadelphia would be manumitted and join the ranks of the city's free black community.²⁶² In the first decades of the nineteenth century, as the manumitted slaves' indentures ended and they finally gained freedom, these free people of color entered the social and economic life on the city. While the historical record attests to the economic success of a small number of black Philadelphians of recent French West Indian extraction, it also documents the creation of a distinct and unassimilated group of black people. This group revolved around a common language, culture, and religion.²⁶³ It seems

²⁶¹ Sarah C. Fanning, "The Roots of Early Black Nationalism: Northern African Americans' Invocations of Haiti in the Early Nineteenth Century," *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Maurice Jackson & Jacqueline Bacon (New York: Routledge, 2010), 42.

²⁶² Branson & Patrick, 196.

²⁶³ Nash, 60; Branson & Patrick, 204.

the established African American community in Philadelphia was no more willing to embrace the Saint-Domingan refugees as free people than they had been slaves. The reasons for this can only be guessed at as prominent African American leaders made no direct statements about refugees. Perhaps the legacy of the slave revolution marked black Saint-Domingans in similar ways from the perspective of both black and white Philadelphians.²⁶⁴

The French ex-slaves' inability to assimilate into Philadelphia's established free black community left them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and impoverishment. Philadelphia's established poor-relief mechanisms, however, were not popular sources of aid for many black Saint-Domingan refugees. The city almshouse's requirement of a recommendation underscored the ambiguous status of black indentured servants in the city.²⁶⁵ Those who wished to extricate themselves from this new form of servitude would have needed the recommendation of the very individuals who commanded their labor. Without contacts in the free African-American community, black Saint-Domingans had few places to turn. This was especially true of female former slaves. Moreau de Saint-Méry reported the "obnoxious luxury" in which female refugees of color lived in Philadelphia, contrasting it with the living conditions of their "compatriots" in Saint-Domingue.²⁶⁶ It is true that Philadelphians were shocked to see mixed race women – often slaves or indentured servants – accompanying white Saint-Domingans openly. In the United States, with the status and opportunities they were accustomed to in the colony closed to them, life proved difficult for refugee women of color. Many lived as paid

²⁶⁴ Branson & Patrick, 205.

²⁶⁵ Branson & Patrick, 197.

²⁶⁶ *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, 1793-1798*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Roberts & Anna M. Roberts (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1947), 311. Quoted in Branson & Patrick, 197.

companions to white refugees, from both the colonies and from mainland France.²⁶⁷

Female ex-slaves were also the bulk of the very few refugees of color who chose to return to Saint-Domingue during the revolution. In November 1798, a ship left Philadelphia en route to Cap-Français. On board were 121 passengers listed as “refugees,” of whom women and young children made up the majority. Since they were listed only by their given names, it is likely that these were black former slaves who were traveling back to the colony with their young children (21 of these passengers were under the age of 9). The push and pull of global migration, and the lack of written records, makes their motivations for return difficult to discern. It is likely, however, that these women were unhappy with the prospects of life in the United States, and wanted to return to Saint-Domingue as free people.²⁶⁸

From slavery to freedom, black Saint-Domingans existed in a legal and moral world that separated them from the established communities in Philadelphia. As the legal property of white refugees, they were not entitled to the types of charitable action that had characterized Philadelphia’s response to their masters and mistresses. While the Pennsylvania Abolition Society labored assiduously throughout the 1790s to secure the freedom from slavery of many of these individuals, the latter spent a number of years bound to a different form of servitude. Only in the first decades of the next century would the vast majority gain their full legal freedom and enter the social and economic life of the city.

Even in freedom, however, Saint-Domingan refugees of color were not

²⁶⁷ Branson & Patrick, 197.

²⁶⁸ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 41-42.

incorporated into Philadelphia's sympathetic imagination. The violence of the Haitian Revolution and the creation of the world's first black republic stoked fears of foreign subversion and racial violence that the presence of larger numbers of former Saint-Domingan slaves did nothing to assuage. Even from black Philadelphians, differences of language, religion, and culture marked these black Saint-Domingans as different. Further, their connection with violent black political activity would perhaps have made them a liability for an African American community trying to establish its equality and its loyalty to the American body politic.

Because black Saint-Domingans could not command the moral imagination of Philadelphians of either race, they faced discrimination, exploitation, and economic uncertainty in their new homes. Nevertheless, free black Saint-Domingans left their mark on Philadelphia. A small but consistent community of black Philadelphians of French West Indian extraction existed in Philadelphia well into the nineteenth century. Church records, city directories, and occupational studies show that this community staked a place for itself within the social and economic life of early national Philadelphia. These individuals did not disappear from Philadelphia, but differences that made black Saint-Domingans unassimilable were the very factors that prevented Philadelphians from being able to find a place for them in a sympathetic construction of the social order in early national America.

CONCLUSION

The sentimental project of the post-Revolutionary period faltered as the United States approached the turn of the century. In many ways, the pervasive beliefs in the power of sensibility to remake society gave way to a more measured understanding of the relationship between the self and social whole, and of America's place in the community of nations. Sarah Knott argues, "Asked to address the formation of a new national society...and made the basis of sympathetic social community within a revolutionary dynamic, and then a radical and reactionary world, sensibility fell short."²⁶⁹

The arrival of refugees from the revolution in Saint-Domingue was certainly not the only demand placed upon sympathy and sensibility in the 1790s. Multiple cultural problems arose that pulled at the edges of sympathetic constructions of social order, as groups such as women, people of color, the laboring classes, and other immigrants sought position within post-Revolutionary society. However, the arrival of refugees from revolutionary civil war in the West Indies, and the outbreak of epidemic disease that followed their arrival, provide two case studies for understanding the fault lines upon which sensibility would fragment.

On its face, the arrival of the Saint-Domingan refugees would have seemed like the ideal situation to demonstrate American benevolence and sympathetic fellow-feeling in the early national period. Here was an opportunity not only for Americans to return the favor for France's aid in the former's war with Great Britain, but to firmly establish the superiority of republican, sympathetic virtues. It is evident that many commentators saw it this way. The limited and equivocal nature of the United States' response to these men

²⁶⁹ Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 324.

and women demonstrates, however, that other factors were at play. Larger cultural concerns structured Philadelphia's response – concerns that belied a reticence to embrace too radical a challenge to the social order. Particularly, America's leaders were concerned about the relationship between republican virtue and republican institutions. While nearly all sides endorsed the superior feelings of the American people, their leaders in Philadelphia were never able to unequivocally endorse a role for government in providing benevolence. The extension of the bonds of sympathy was left to the people of the United States, and Philadelphians responded to distressed Saint-Domingans in much the same way they responded to their own needy fellow-citizens.

Most especially, Philadelphians were concerned about race. Race proved to be a singularly limiting factor in the extension of sympathy in 1790s Philadelphia. While white refugees could expect at least rhetorical sympathetic identification from white Philadelphians, refugees of color remained outside the sympathetic imagination and action of white and black Americans and suffered because of it. While hundreds of black Saint-Domingans eventually went free in Philadelphia, they had to live out long periods of indenture to their former masters or to the individuals to whom their masters may have chosen to sell their indentures. Once free, these refugees of color found integration into Philadelphia no easier than it would have been when they arrived. By and large, white abolitionists were content to wash their hands of their benevolent project once the dictates of the law had been satisfied. Whatever sympathy and aid one might expect to have come from Philadelphia's African American community never materialized. Throughout the early national period, Saint-Domingan freedmen remained a distinct group in Philadelphia, integrated neither into the city's white or established free black

communities.

When yellow fever broke out in the city in the summer of 1793, white and black Philadelphians rushed to the aid of their neighbors. Civic-minded whites and African Americans tended the sick, organized relief, and buried the dead. When the crisis had abated, however, questions of race became central to the reconstruction of the social order. White middling-sort Philadelphians like Mathew Carey were perfectly comfortable excluding African Americans from demands for expanded political participation. African American leaders like Absalom Jones and Richard Allen wanted to make sure that the contributions of their community would not be overlooked. The yellow fever epidemic unsettled Philadelphia more than any other event since the deprivations of the Revolutionary War. Like the post-war period, the post-epidemic period seemed to provide an opportunity for the transformation of society. Black and white Philadelphians – invested in the ideals of common emotional culture and sympathetic social order – seized the opportunity to chip away at the foundations of the Federalist political order, to expand the limits of “who counted” in post-Revolutionary America.

Thus, within the larger turmoil of the 1790s, the refugee and yellow fever crises – linked as they were – provide lenses through which to understand the contours and limitations of sympathetic ideology in the new nation. That sensibility came up short in dealing with the challenges it faced may have exposed fundamental weaknesses in its effectiveness to provide a new social order, but the fact remains that disparate groups within the new republic claimed sympathy and sensibility as their own, not just as a way to co-opt dominant discourses but as a real framework for understanding society and for communicating demands. Sensibility continued to have cultural resonance long after the

Revolution. Indeed, the ideal of sympathetic social order was expanded as more and more groups used the language of sensibility to give voice to their political feelings. That the twin crises of refugees and yellow fever prompted a fierce debate over the nature and limits of sympathetic ideology attests to the persistent cultural valence of these ideals during a period in which the European cultural centers from which they had been produced were beginning to disavow them. Sympathy was asked in the 1790s to reconcile disparate and often-contradictory political orientations. That sympathetic ideology eventually proved to not be up to the task set for it only reinforces understandings the depth of Americans' commitment to sympathy as tool for the organization of society.

Eventually, sensibility as a tool for social organization would give way in the United States, as it had already done in Britain and France, to new forms of understanding the place of the self in society. As Knott argues, however, this “lag” may represent a more thorough-going commitment to sensibility in the early republic – a persistence of the appeal and utility of this particular cultural mode in America after it had passed in Europe.²⁷⁰ Whatever the case, in the decades from the Revolution to the start of the next century, sensibility flourished in America and provided a foundation for a dearly-held belief in the revolutionary project of the new nation. Nor did sympathy die in the nineteenth century. Appeals to feeling and shared emotionality continued to ring throughout American politics and culture. Abolitionist literature in particular preserved appeals to emotion and fellow feeling, a trend that began in the last decades of the 1700s. While the ideal of organizing society around shared emotion faded, the belief that Americans could make emotion politically-actionable continued to persist.

²⁷⁰ Knott, 327.

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