



Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom

Samuel Otter

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In *Philadelphia Stories*, Samuel Otter finds literary value, historical significance, and political urgency in a sequence of texts written in and about Philadelphia between the Constitution and the Civil War. Historians such as Gary B. Nash and Julie Winch have chronicled the distinctive social and political space of early national Philadelphia. Yet while individual writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, and George Lippard have been linked to Philadelphia, no sustained attempt has been made to understand these figures, and many others, as writing in a tradition tied to the city's history. The site of William Penn's "Holy Experiment" in religious toleration and representative government and of national Declaration and Constitution, near the border between slavery and freedom, Philadelphia was home to one of the largest and most influential "free" African American communities in the United States. The city was seen by residents and observers as the laboratory for a social experiment with international consequences. Philadelphia would be the stage on which racial character would be tested and a possible future for the United States after slavery would be played out. It would be the arena in which various residents would or would not demonstrate their capacities to participate in the nation's civic and political life. Otter argues that the Philadelphia "experiment" (the term used in the nineteenth-century) produced a largely unacknowledged literary tradition of peculiar forms and intensities, in which verbal performance and social behavior assumed the weight of race and nation.

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