

2-2011

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Little Founders on the Small Screen: Interpreting a Multicultural American Revolution for Children’s Television

ANDREW M. SCHOCKET

From 2002 to 2004, the children’s animated series *Liberty’s Kids* aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the United States’ public television network. It runs over forty half-hour episodes and features a stellar cast, including such celebrities as Walter Cronkite, Michael Douglas, Yolanda King, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Liam Neeson, and Annette Bening. Television critics generally loved it, and there are now college students who can trace their interest in the American Revolution to having watched this series when they were children. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it is the most extended and in-depth encounter with the American Revolution that most young people in the United States are likely to have encountered, and is appropriately patriotic and questioning, celebratory and chastening. Although children certainly learn a great deal about multiculturalism from popular culture, the tropes and limitations of depicting history on television trend toward personification, toward reduced complexity and, for children, toward resisting examining the darker sides of human experience. As this essay suggests, the genre’s limits match the limits of a multicultural history in its attempt to show diversity and agency during a time when “liberty and justice for all” proved to be more apt as an aspiration at best and an empty slogan at worst than as an accurate depiction of the society that proclaimed it. This essay is not an effort to be, as Robert Sklar put it, a “historian cop,” policing the accuracy of the series by patrolling for inaccuracies. Rather, it is a consideration of the inherent difficulties of trying to apply a multicultural sensibility to a portrayal of the American Revolution.

From 2002 to 2004, the children’s animated series *Liberty’s Kids* aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the United States’ public television

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The author thanks Jennifer Lupinacci, Michael Maliani, Doug McIntyre, Kevin O’Donnell, and Jack Rakove for taking their time to be interviewed for this piece, and to the attendees at the Upstate New York Seminar in Early American History, Leigh Ann Wheeler, and the anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of American Studies* for their comments and suggestions.

network.¹ It has since appeared in syndication and on the History Channel (a US cable channel), was released in full on DVD in fall 2008, and is now available in the US episode by episode streamed over the Internet. It runs over forty half-hour episodes and features a stellar cast, including such celebrities as Walter Cronkite, Michael Douglas, Yolanda King, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Liam Neeson, and Annette Bening. Television critics generally loved it, and, as I am finding out, there are now college students who can trace their interest in the American Revolution to having watched this series when they were children.² At the turn of the twenty-first century, it is the most extended encounter with the American Revolution that most young people in the United States are likely to have encountered. Given that it is longer than either *Liberty!* or *The Revolution*, the two longest documentaries concerning American independence, *Liberty's Kids* is likely to be the most intense interpretation of the American Revolution its viewers will ever see on television, and is appropriately patriotic and questioning, celebratory and chastening.³ To me, as a historian who primarily studies the American Revolution, *Liberty's Kids* is also a reflection of its time and its agenda; that is, the recasting of the idea of America along multicultural lines.⁴ PBS's parent corporation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), aims to "address the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities." Accordingly, it has deliberately offered programming reflecting the central tenets of multiculturalism: interpreting ethnic, racial, and gender diversity as socially

¹ This and all subsequent references to the content of the series are based upon the DVD release of the entire series in fall 2008: *Liberty's Kids the Complete Series*, DVD (Shout! Factory, 2002).

² For critical reaction to the series see Judith S. Gillies, "That's the Way It Is ... in the 1770s," *Washington Post*, 25 Aug. 2002, sec. TV Week; Ernest Hooper, "U.S. History PBS-Style Great for You and Your Kids," *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), 25 Dec. 2003; M. S. Mason, "Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Kids," *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 Aug. 2002; Kathryn Shattuck, "Voices of Freedom, and of Its Anchors," *New York Times*, 10 Nov. 2002, Section 13, Column 1, Television, 55; Jonathan Storm, "'Liberty's Kids': History Lessons, Prehistoric Animation," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2 Sept. 2002; Kevin D. Thompson, "'Liberty's Kids' track the American Revolution," *Cox News Service*, 29 Aug. 2002.

³ G. R. Edgerton, "Introduction: Television as Historian: A Different Kind Of History Altogether," in G. R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1–18; for a perspective on where contemporary Americans encounter history see Michael Frisch, "American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography," *Journal of American History*, 75, 4 (March 1989), 1130–55.

⁴ This has always been true of treatments of the American Revolution for children. See Joel Taxel, "The American Revolution in Children's Fiction: An Analysis of Historical Meaning and Narrative Structure," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 14, 1 (Spring 1984), 7–55.

salutary; celebrating a great range of varied cultural practices; portraying people (real and fictional) from diverse backgrounds sympathetically as complex individuals; and showing those people as subjects in their own stories rather than as objects in the stories of others.⁵

For the past forty years, scholars of the American Revolution have often followed the same agenda, unearthing the stories of women and African Americans – both free and enslaved – and the travails of Native Americans. Writers have limitless text at their disposal to engage in complex, nuanced interpretations for sophisticated readers. Conversely, each *Liberty's Kids* episode had to resolve a narrative arc in what was effectively eighteen minutes of original action. Although children learn a great deal about multiculturalism from popular culture, the commonly accepted tropes and parameters of depicting history on television in the contemporary United States, especially for children, present a set of challenges in terms of medium and audience that writers of academic history generally do not have to consider.⁶ But the limits of the medium do not preclude complexity or nuance. On the contrary, the main challenge is for a multicultural history to show diversity and agency during a time when “liberty and justice for all” proved to be more apt as an aspiration at best and an empty slogan at worst than as an accurate depiction of the society that proclaimed it. In sum, then, this essay is not so much my effort to be, as Robert Sklar put it, a “historian cop,” policing the accuracy of the series by citing inaccuracies.⁷ All in all, the series is pretty good. Rather, this is a consideration of the inherent difficulties of trying to apply a multicultural sensibility to the American Revolution.

In presenting the American Revolution, the creators of *Liberty's Kids* had to wrestle with the central narrative tropes that traditionally frame its consideration: monarchy to republic, colony to nation, slavery to freedom. All of these arcs would seem to be consistent with an interpretive ethic that celebrates equality and the liberation of individuals of all stripes in contemporary America. But there is a catch: a multicultural interpretation of those narratives is at odds with much of what scholars have argued about the American Revolution. There were more people enslaved at the end of the Revolution than when it began. Native Americans did have various options during the Revolutionary War, nearly all of them bad, and for most Native American communities the war was disastrous. Women of all ethnicities suffered

⁵ “CPB: Public Broadcasting Act of 1967,” <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/text.html>.

⁶ Carlos E. Cortés, *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach about Diversity* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 70–90.

⁷ Robert Sklar, “Review: Historical Films: Scofflaws and the Historian-Cop,” *Reviews in American History*, 25, 2 (June 1997), 346–50.

greatly; and in terms of legal and social status, lost as much as they gained.⁸ While diverse, the thirteen colonies that rebelled were nowhere near as diverse as the contemporary US, with few Hispanics, a small smattering of Jews, and almost no Asians. The events central to those narratives of monarchy to republic and colony to nation revolved around a leadership homogeneously male, white, and Protestant. Furthermore, even scholars sympathetic to multiculturalism disagree on how to attribute agency: Cassandra Pybus's monograph *Epic Journeys of Freedom* celebrates the courage of black loyalists willing to follow their ideals to the ends of the earth, but Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* volume lionizes white Briton John Clarkson as a Moses leading occasionally ungrateful black loyalists to Sierra Leone.⁹ A children's cartoon might seem like an especially challenging site to explore contradictions of these kinds.

Liberty's Kids came about through a combination of serendipitous events and fairly typical television production processes.¹⁰ Owned by children's animation mogul Andy Heyward, DIC Entertainment was a Burbank-based production and licensing company (since swallowed up) that had created numerous successful though sometimes vapid cartoon series. A family trip to Washington, DC in 1997 so civically inspired Heyward that at his next birthday party he handed out fake-parchment copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.¹¹ Longtime animation writer and sometime DIC-collaborator Kevin O'Donnell attended the party. O'Donnell soon emailed Heyward proposing a cartoon series, as O'Donnell later recalled, portraying "the real stories about the American Revolution, seen through the eyes of a teenage girl on her way to America in search of her father and the American dream, and a teenage Yankee boy already living it."¹² Heyward immediately agreed. They recognized PBS as the only viable immediate outlet, although DIC executives also knew that in syndication the

⁸ The historiography on these topics is vast. For syntheses of African Americans, women, and Native Americans during the Revolutionary period see, respectively, Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Joan R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740–1790*, rev. edn (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁹ Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007); Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (London: BBC Books, 2005).

¹⁰ Robby London, "Producing Children's Television," in J. Alison Bryant, ed., *The Children's Television Community* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 78–80.

¹¹ Brian Ward, *A Revolutionary Tale: A Look Back at 'Liberty's Kids'*, DVD (DIC Entertainment, 2008).

¹² Kevin O'Donnell, interview with author, telephone, 5 Feb. 2009.

series could fit into a programming block to satisfy new FCC rules that required commercial broadcast stations to include more educational programming. By including *Liberty's Kids* in the block, DIC could allay concerns about other programs with that were less explicitly educational.¹³

Heyward gave O'Donnell broad control over the project, along with director Mike Maliani, who had decades of experience designing and directing cartoons.¹⁴ In turn, they brought in Doug McIntyre to help revise the series "bible" – the production document mapping out the narrative arcs and the characters – and to supervise writing episodes. A veteran writer of adult sitcoms and dramatic shows, McIntyre had a well-deserved reputation as a history buff.¹⁵ DIC contracted with two big-name academic consultants, historian Jack Rakove and children's media expert Gordon Berry.¹⁶ Children's programmer Jennifer Lupinacci handled the series from the PBS end, ensuring that the show would mesh with the network's goals and the sensibilities of its viewers and their parents, while creative control centered in DIC's Burbank offices. Originally scheduled to debut in summer 2001, *Liberty's Kids* began airing in fall 2002.

Liberty's Kids follows the adventures of James Hiller and Sarah Phillips, young fictional "journalists" reporting for Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*. As Franklin's ward (he is an orphan), apprentice, and a committed Yankee, James reports from a Whig slant. English Sarah, entrusted to Franklin's care in her American sojourn as she seeks her army officer father, takes the loyalist side in print and in spirited debates with James. Often accompanied on their adventures by the also fictional pair of Henri (an orphaned French boy) and Moses (Franklin's free black employee), they are somewhere between enterprising reporters chasing stories wherever those

¹³ Amy B. Jordan and Emory H. Woodard IV, "Growing Pains: Children's Television in the New Regulatory Environment," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 557 (May 1998), 83–95; Dale Kunkel, "They Call This Educational?," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 134, 37 (2004), 36; *idem*, "Policy Battles over Defining Children's Educational Television," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 557 (May 1998), 39–53.

¹⁴ Michael Maliani, interview with author, telephone, 18 Feb. 2009.

¹⁵ Doug McIntyre, interview with author, telephone, 24 Feb. 2009. Among other topics, McIntyre was and is particularly interested in the Wright brothers, publishing two articles on them in the mid-1990s: Doug McIntyre, "Wings for Man," *American History Illustrated*, Feb. 1994; *idem*, "Odyssey of the Flyer," *American History Illustrated*, Feb. 1994.

¹⁶ Jack Rakove is the Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1997). Gordon Berry, then a professor of education and media studies at UCLA, had long consulted for television networks on children's programming, beginning with a formal role in developing *Fat Albert* with Bill Cosby in the early 1970s. B. Merritt, "Bill Cosby: TV Auteur?," in Harry B. Shaw, ed., *Perspectives of Black Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: BGSU Popular Press, 1990), 131.

might lead and eighteenth-century Forrest Gumps, fortuitously showing up at, and sometimes getting caught up in, momentous events. *Liberty's Kids* echoes what may be the two best-known previous films of the Revolution for children, both Walt Disney efforts: the 1953 animated twenty-one-minute *Ben and Me*, based upon the Robert Lawson novel of the same name, which ascribes many of Franklin's ideas (as well as, by the end of the film, the opening of the Declaration of Independence) to a mouse named Amos; and the live-action, eighty-minute *Johnny Tremain*, based upon the Esther Forbes novel, which follows a patriotic orphaned Boston boy from the Boston Tea Party through the battles at Lexington and Concord.¹⁷

Despite the anachronism of investigative reporters interviewing subjects for stories, *Liberty's Kids* otherwise gamely reflects Revolutionary life and times. The series opens in 1773 with the Boston Tea Party and continues through independence, the war, the Constitutional Convention, and Washington's inaugural. The action ranges from Franklin's negotiations in France and John Paul Jones's victories off the coast of Britain to the Ohio country and from the New Hampshire grants to the lower Mississippi. Of actual historical actors, Franklin, George Washington, and Abigail Adams get the most face time, and the series features such usual suspects as Thomas Jefferson, John Paul Jones, Paul Revere, and Benedict Arnold, alongside other, lesser-known personalities: Deborah Sampson, Joseph Plumb Martin, Joseph Brant, Moses Michael Hays, Elizabeth Freeman, James Armistead, and Sybil Ludington, to name a few.

As is often the case with intentionally multicultural projects, this one was bound up in politics. *Liberty's Kids* had the potential to meet several goals for PBS. Since the debut of *Sesame Street* in 1969, PBS had built a sterling reputation and broad viewership for young children's programming. This was especially the case for its emphasis on multiculturalism. PBS was "heavy in programs about literacy and some science," said Lupinacci, but "there was little history and very little for the older kids," so *Liberty's Kids* could fulfill primary objectives for a public network that took seriously its charge to educate while it entertained and to meet underserved needs in mass media.¹⁸ It also did not hurt that the subject matter would play well for the CPB, whose funding depended upon a 1990s Republican-dominated Congress suspicious of much of its programming, long characterized by conservatives as liberal-leaning. Many conservatives within and without Congress were also

¹⁷ Walt Disney Productions and Walt Disney Home Video (Firm), *Ben and Me* (Walt Disney Home Video, 1953); *Johnny Tremain* (Walt Disney Home Video, 1997).

¹⁸ Jennifer Lupinacci to Andrew M. Schocket, "Liberty's Kids," 14 May 2009.

ideologically uncomfortable with public funding of television given the ever-growing array of private-sector options on broadcast and cable.¹⁹ When unveiling the series at its annual member-station convention in 2001, John F. Wilson, PBS's co-chief of programming, said that *Liberty's Kids* would "bring history and civics alive for school-age children," and Heyward proudly stated that the series would "inspir[e] young Americans to understand a little more how fortunate we are to be living in such an open democracy," as Secretary of Education Rod Paige looked on, something that no doubt played well to PBS's at-best ambivalent political patrons.²⁰ By producing programming that could be portrayed as patriotic – thus placating its conservative critics – as well as multicultural, PBS could have its cake and eat it, too.²¹

What ultimately appeared onscreen resulted from cordial but constant negotiations between the PBS's programming arm and the creators at DIC, within DIC, and between DIC and its consultants. O'Donnell conceived the series from beginning to end. After O'Donnell drafted the series's initial bible, PBS asked for revisions, which were largely completed in their specifics at DIC, especially by McIntyre. McIntyre then headed the team of writers for the first fourteen episodes, after which he left and Jay Abramowitz took over as head writer.²² Script drafts were sent to Rakove and Berry for their comments. As Rakove later noted, his was only a voice sometimes taken into account; he looked at drafts of each episode as they were generated and wrote up a few single-spaced pages of comments, which the writers were free to incorporate or ignore, much like Berry's.²³ Meanwhile, Maliani supervised the drawing of the storyboards and how the characters and scenes would look. The writers applied their final touches, and the whole episode went into pre-production. Reaching consensus did not come easily, but debates resulted primarily from differences of emphasis rather than fundamental differences over history or programming. Initially wary of a production company with a sparse track record in educational programming, Lupinacci later said that "they were not trying to sell chocolate bars in the schoolyard," and that

¹⁹ Kim McAvoy, "Public Broadcasters Go on Offense," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 124, 51 (19 Dec. 1994), 48; Irvin Molotsky, "One Tough Bird, After All: How Public Broadcasting Survived the Attacks of Conservatives," *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 1997, sec. E.

²⁰ "DIC Entertainment and PBS Announce the Debut of 'Liberty's Kids,' A Revolutionary Animated Series; Walter Cronkite to Portray Benjamin Franklin," *PR Newswire*, 23 June 2001.

²¹ Lupinacci to Schocket, "Liberty's Kids." McAvoy, 48; Molotsky; L. Simensky, "Programming Children's Television: The PBS Model," in Bryant, *The Children's Television Community*, 131–46; "DIC Entertainment and PBS Announce the Debut of 'Liberty's Kids,'".

²² Kevin O'Donnell, interview with author, telephone, 6 Feb. 2009; McIntyre, interview with author.

²³ Jack Rakove, interview with author, telephone, 21 Feb. 2009.

“when [DIC] met our reservations on different points, they found creative solutions.”²⁴ Three of the men most committed to the series – O’Donnell, Maliani, and Heyward – had kids in the audience target age at the time, helping them keep perspective on what kids will watch and believe, and just as crucially, what they will not.²⁵

Haggling over interpretation generally occurred along a narrow range that indicated the pervasive and, to some extent, unexamined acceptance of multicultural values among the participants (Berry, on the other hand, was a longtime expert in the field). At the same time DIC was producing *Liberty’s Kids*, Heyward, London, and Berry were principals behind convening Mediascope, a working group of media professionals, educators, researchers, and parents’ representatives.²⁶ DIC sponsored and hosted proceedings that resulted in broad guidelines for children’s media that coincided with PBS’s main concerns for the series. One particular topic that the group addressed in its main set of recommendations was “diversity and stereotypes.” It called for “special sensitivity and balance . . . in the portrayal of gender, ethnicity, color, age, religion, culture, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and physical and mental abilities.” It also promoted “positive portrayals of unconventional individuals.”²⁷ And yet other planks in the document suggest necessary conflicts not readily apparent. Inherent in these guidelines were all the contradictions of the multicultural ethos, ones especially problematic when considering eighteenth-century America: the difficulty of showing empathy for people whose actions or values may be predicated on the subjugation of others, and the question of how to portray what we recognize as agency at the turn of the twenty-first century despite the price that eighteenth-century people recognized as coming with such actions. In discussions on how to write *Liberty’s Kids*, McIntyre played the outlier and provocateur, as one might expect of a man who soon made a name for himself in the 2000s as the Los Angeles area’s top conservative radio talk-show host. McIntyre likes meat-and-potatoes history, preferring a narrative heavy on elections and battles, and one of his later regrets about the series was that it did not display the Battle of Brandywine, the war’s bloodiest – though he

²⁴ Lupinacci to Schocket, “Liberty’s Kids.”

²⁵ O’Donnell, interview with author, 5 Feb. 2009; Maliani, interview with author.

²⁶ Jocelyn Longworth, “Kid Moguls Converge to Draft Children’s Production Guidelines,” *Kidscreen*, 1 Nov. 1999, <http://www.kidscreen.com/articles/magazine/19991101/27104.html>.

²⁷ Mediascope, “Special Considerations for Creators of Children’s Media,” *Mediascope*, 11 Aug. 2004, <http://web.archive.org/web/20040811075944/http://www.mediascope.org/pubs/scccm.htm>.

also later lamented that the series had not shown more of Native Americans.²⁸

The narrative arcs of *Liberty's Kids* move along parallel threads, ones that historians and laymen would recognize as traditional. Central is the challenge to British political authority through the establishment of a stable American political authority. Especially in the first quarter of the series – before the Declaration of Independence – but continuing throughout, both real historical actors and the series's fictional main characters debate the nature of governance in the context of the imperial relationship. To what extent does authority derive from being geographically and socially close to the people, and to what extent from tradition? To what extent is the United States a place and a government, and to what extent does it represent a set of ideals? The creators dedicated episodes to the second Continental Congress, the Declaration of Independence, the establishment of the postal service, the Articles of Confederation, and the federal Constitutional Convention. *Liberty's Kids* places many disputes – rightly and wrongly – in the light of the struggle between British and American authority. Most egregiously, the “Green Mountain Boys” episode paints Vermont-area struggles as being between patriots and loyalists, rather than as a long-standing conflict involving competing speculators, landlords, tenants, imperial officials, and the governors of two colonies – but *Liberty's Kids* is balanced in other ways. An episode chronicling discontent over high prices in wartime Philadelphia dismisses the notion that consumer discontent represented loyalist backsliding. Nonetheless, the series shoots the Revolution through the conceptual lens of establishing an independent government and the prosecution of the war, which together form the central elements in more than half of the episodes.

Voicing aspirations and concerns similar to those of public history professionals trying to interpret the same issue in other venues, the show's creative team had the most trouble wrestling with its depiction of slavery.²⁹ Trying to portray agency and dignity on the part of African Americans ran head-on into the reality that, in terms of resistance, most slaves had few attractive options even during the chaos of the Revolution. Everyone involved wanted to portray slavery as the nation's “original sin” – a phrase that came up repeatedly in interviews – and wanted to show African Americans as active players in the Revolution, but how? O'Donnell recalls one

²⁸ McIntyre, interview with author.

²⁹ James Oliver Horton, “Slavery in American History: An Uncomfortable National Dialogue,” in James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 35–56.

particular conference call when he kept everyone on the line for five hours in an effort to hash out how. One suggestion, immediately rejected, was not to show slavery at all. Nonetheless, everyone was cautious about how much of the cruelty of slavery could or should be shown in a children's show and wanted to find a balance between acknowledging slavery's barbarity and portraying the human dignity of the enslaved.³⁰ Berry and PBS pushed for emphasizing the latter, though McIntyre remained skeptical that such a treatment represented an accurate interpretation of the repressive slave regime.³¹ Lupinacci said that PBS "wanted to be able to portray African Americans not as victims, but people."³² In the planning stages, they decided to lean toward African American agency. The onscreen product ended up even more on the agency end of the spectrum. In what was probably inspired by movies depicting twentieth-century prisons and labor camps, an early script described a plantation enclosed by high walls and a white overseer coming into slave quarters to tell the slaves that it was time for lights out. Rakove's objection resulted in its removal.³³ Episode by episode, scene by scene, the writers, producers, directors, consultants, and programmers made decisions and moved on.

Coming up with the character of Moses represented a masterstroke of weaving an African American character through the entire series. For DIC, concerned with narrative structure and keeping kids tuning in, Moses provided a sympathetic adult figure to watch over Sarah and James while Franklin was in France, and he allowed viewers to see what became a familiar face in nearly every episode. For Lupinacci and for PBS as an institution trying to foster appreciation for diversity and self-esteem for all its young viewers, Moses "was a free black man, a counterpoint to the characters that would need to be represented as slaves," and thus depicted African Americans contributing to the American founding through their own agency.³⁴ For all involved, his appearance as a main character showed an African American as central rather than peripheral to the story. McIntyre first wrote the character as having been freed by his owner in gratitude for a heroic act. PBS balked. Rather than a black man gaining freedom through white largesse, PBS wanted Moses to have worked to buy his freedom, thus demonstrating agency. McIntyre objected on the grounds that very few blacks at the time had the opportunity to work for their own freedom, and having Moses do so would give an erroneous impression of typicality.³⁵ In

³⁰ O'Donnell, interview with author, 6 Feb. 2009.

³¹ McIntyre, interview with author.

³² Lupinacci to Schocket, "Liberty's Kids."

³³ Rakove, interview with author.

³⁴ Lupinacci to Schocket, "Liberty's Kids."

³⁵ McIntyre, interview with author.

this case, PBS won. Ironically, when Rakove saw the script, he expressed misgivings with the entire premise of a black man being accepted to essentially run a newspaper in 1770s British North America, arguing that it would not be a realistic possibility for at least another couple of decades.³⁶ To be fair, it is a point on which scholars, too, could disagree: given that women, indentured servants, apprentices, and slaves often took on major responsibilities in late eighteenth-century businesses, my take is that the race and legal status of Franklin's workers would have been immaterial to the subscribers of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* as long as they still accepted the paper as being under Franklin's supervision.

The series creators worked hard to explore African Americans pursuing their own American Revolution. Moses reminds Sarah and especially James that national sovereignty is but one kind of freedom. In "Liberty or Death," Moses sees his brother Cato being auctioned in Virginia. Cato eventually escapes to the British and reappears, driven out of the British ranks at Yorktown with other black loyalists and finally making his way to Nova Scotia. Perhaps the series's most profound scene occurs in an exchange between the Marquis de Lafayette and James Armistead (eventually James Armistead Lafayette), a black man who convinced his owner to let him serve the American cause and offers himself as a spy.³⁷ Armistead's face is obscured until the scene's climactic moment. When asked what he can do for Lafayette, James replies, "Sir, I am invisible. I'm a black man. Most white folk don't look at me. They don't think about me. They don't care about me. They don't fear me." Armistead's face fills the screen as he asks, "Do you have any use for an invisible man?" Clearly inspired by Ralph Ellison, writer Jay Abramowitz later cited his debt to his readings of twentieth-century African American writers for illumination of black perceptions of race relations.³⁸ Similarly, Cato's hatred of all whites transforms into a deeper understanding of whites as individuals, which he says "feels like a weight off my shoulders," a catharsis cribbed from Malcolm X's autobiography but strikingly akin to that movingly described by black loyalist Boston King in his personal narrative.³⁹ Like much of the scholarship on race and slavery in the

³⁶ Rakove, interview with author.

³⁷ "James Lafayette," in Harold E Selesky, ed., *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution: Library of Military History*, 2nd edn, Volume 2 (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006), 597.

³⁸ "Liberty's Kids Special Web Only Exclusives," *Shout! Factory – Music, Movies and Video for the discerning Pop Culture Geek*, http://www.shoutfactory.com/video/wip/8/libertys_kids_special_web_only_exclusive.aspx.

³⁹ Ruth Holmes Whitehead and Carmelita A. M. Robertson, eds., *The Life of Boston King: Black Loyalist, Minister and Master Carpenter* (Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Museum and Nimbus Pub, 2003).

Revolutionary period, *Liberty's Kids* perhaps unduly focusses on agency and hope at the expense of considering the vast majority of African Americans who remained in slavery, but is nonetheless earnest and affecting in its treatment of the fictional Moses and Cato as well as Phillis Wheatley and Elizabeth Freeman.

Lupinacci “very much wanted to have a diverse cast of characters” and found ready allies in Berry and O’Donnell.⁴⁰ They discussed picturing not only Anglos, Native Americans, and African Americans, but also Jews, Latinos, and, from the PBS end, even Asian Americans – the last of which provoked McIntyre’s exasperation.⁴¹ No Asians made the cut, but one Latino did: *Liberty's Kids* features an episode on Spanish governor of Louisiana Bernardo de Gálvez, who is absent in all but the most encyclopedic scholarly treatments of the Revolution, something that McIntyre acknowledged in chagrin. James ventures down the Mississippi River, all to show that Gálvez supported the American cause. More surprising than the inclusion of Gálvez, Native Americans only take center stage in two episodes, and O’Donnell and McIntyre later regretted not featuring Indians more prominently.⁴² One show sympathetically portrays the dilemma Cornstalk faced in navigating between taking a cautious if humiliating tack, or acceding to the understandable rage of his fellow Shawnees and the ruinous prospect of taking up the hatchet in a war that could only bring further misery. Having Berry on the team served not only to help DIC’s writers think about how children would perceive what they heard and saw, but also provided cover for DIC. Such was the strength of Berry’s reputation that his endorsement of episodes carried great weight with PBS, and so, with few exceptions, DIC carried the day.⁴³

Liberty's Kids most revealingly shows its multicultural bent in an episode depicting the story of Moses Michael Hays, an actual historical figure. Moses and James ride to Newport to buy ink and paper from Hays, to whom Moses admits, “I haven’t met many Israelites.” A patriot, Hays treasures Rhode Island’s religious freedom, though rues that as a Jew he lacks full citizenship. James bursts in with a list of men suspected to be Tories because they will not sign an oath to the new government, including Hays. Summoned by an angry crowd to the statehouse to sign the oath, Hays refuses. “I’m as patriotic as

⁴⁰ Lupinacci to Schocket, “*Liberty's Kids*”; O’Donnell, interview with author, 6 Feb. 2009.

⁴¹ McIntyre, interview with author.

⁴² “The Liberty Forum: View topic – An interview with Kevin O’Donnell,” *The Liberty Forum*, 10 Oct. 2003, <http://web.archive.org/web/20031010180338/www.rpgdarkside.com/libertyskids/forum/viewtopic.php?t=127>; McIntyre, interview with author.

⁴³ McIntyre, interview with author.

any man,” he explains, but “I am also an Israelite in a land of Christians, and as such I have not been granted the liberty to vote.” Rhode Island promised religious tolerance. However, “until such a time as all of us are ready to recognize each other as equals,” Hays intones, “I will not sign.” Back at the shop, Hays is called outside again, by the same group of men, only this time, in a show of solidarity, they all agree to sign the oath, too. Here, too, the show’s writers condensed the actual event, in which, after much haggling, Hays was allowed to sign an alternately worded oath (though not all Jews were).⁴⁴ It is a minor incident in the Revolution’s grand scheme, and even in American Jewish historiography, whose seminal texts barely mention it. Furthermore, the writers’ selection of Hays reveals a departure from a figure that might have been chosen had the series been made a few decades ago: Haym Solomon, a minor Philadelphia merchant who had long been dubiously touted in American Jewish religious education as “financier of the Revolution.” Here, the quest for a multicultural past led not only to a subject – a Jew – but also to the choice of lesson. Just as with Cato and Cornstalk, *Liberty’s Kids’s* Hays is a member of an ethnic minority portrayed not as a token contributor to the cause of national independence, but as pursuing ends that the egalitarian aspirations of the Revolution would appear to endorse, if not to achieve.

The weft holding these colorful threads into one fabric is Sarah’s transformation from loyal subject to American patriot. For *Liberty’s Kids*, ultimately the Revolution is about defining what it is to be American, a topic that comes up in various contexts and guises without ever being pinned down. No scene more succinctly reveals this theme than one in “Intolerable Acts” recapitulating Franklin’s humiliation in front of the Privy Council in 1774. In a departure from strict historical accuracy but perhaps true to the moment’s spirit, Franklin rhetorically asks, “am I a British subject, or the citizen of a new country?” and emphatically answers, “I am not British, I am an American.” But what does that mean? Sarah begins the show primarily as the counterweight to James’s heartfelt but hackneyed patriotic musings. James declares that he is a citizen rather than a subject, and has rights; Sarah retorts, “doesn’t Phillis [Wheatley] have rights?” As she writes to her mother, who remains in London, “these Americans speak of liberty and freedom to all, but deny it to those with skin different from their own.” Sarah points out

⁴⁴ Jonathan Sarna, Benny Kraut, and Samuel K. Joseph, eds., *Jews and the Founding of the Republic* (New York: M. Wiener Pub., 1985), 22, 37–38; Ellen Smith and Jonathan D. Sarna, “Introduction,” in ed. George M. Goodwin and Ellen Smith, eds., *The Jews of Rhode Island* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 3; Holly Snyder to Andrew M. Schocket, “Moses Michael Hays,” 19 Jan. 2010.

that Parliament is reasonable to ask the Bostonians to pay for the tea they dumped in the harbor, and in 1775 writes home to her mother that “I am proud to remain steadfastly British,” though Franklin warns that “no man or woman can remain neutral.” James demands liberties and rights; Sarah points out the value of order, peace, and obeying the law. James militantly calls for American independence and exults at its declaration; for Sarah independence is dangerous and she fears the costs of war.

Sarah’s decision eventually to side with the Americans reveals the difficult hoops the show’s writers had to leap through by placing an adolescent girl as the pivotal character in the American Revolution. She cannot make her decision based upon personal liberty or on resentment of British people or British policies. After all, Sarah questions why Arnold is a traitor for trading allegiances but she is not; she empathizes with loyalist Mrs. Radcliffe, who “only wanted to be left alone” in the British empire and now must evacuate her home in New York City to begin a farm in Nova Scotia; and she remains close to her British parents (thus, like the orphan James, avoiding the patricidal emotional implications of revolution). The Crown’s engagement of Hessian mercenaries dismays her, and she bristles at loyalists’ and British officers’ dismissal of the rebels as misguided riffraff. She gets serendipitously reunited with her father in the Ohio country, who loves the country’s broad spaces and sense of liberty. Returning to London to be with her mother, she notes the difference between what Lady Phillips characterizes as an English society ruled by “class and custom” as opposed to America’s fluidity and ingenuity. But she continues to be rankled by American hypocrisy, especially in the continuance of slavery. Most of all, she is impressed with Americans’ persistence in pursuit of their ideals despite their failure to live up to them. In a church converted to a hospital for Continental soldiers, she wonders (in both senses of that term) “what devotion to duty or country would make men go through something like this?” She is moved by Lafayette’s sacrifices, enlisted men’s willingness to fight, Tom Paine’s passion, Molly Corbin’s spirit, Abigail Adams’s intellect, and John Paul Jones’s courage. It may seem like a rather curious choice by the show’s writers – that what convinces Sarah is not ideology, but perseverance. But without much to hate about Britain or to unabashedly love about Revolutionary ideology, nationalist fervor, or materialistic motivations, all that is left is admiration, rather a thin reed to grasp, but in effect that was the only way out of the corner the writers had painted themselves into by putting Sarah front and center.

Sarah’s forthright manner is no less problematic. To make her a paragon for independent, turn-of-the-twenty-first-century girls (her character is an amalgam of O’Donnell’s two daughters’ positive qualities), Sarah behaves in

ways that would have been abominable for a girl in eighteenth-century British America.⁴⁵ True, James and others sometimes caution her, a signal to the audience that her boldness was unusual. But she faces few consequences for her social aberrance. This is rather typical of onscreen historical fiction, which usually projects contemporary mores and mentalities onto the past, and television as a medium is particularly susceptible to transposing unfamiliar notes into more familiar keys. Writers and producers profess wanting to show past actors, in the current phrase, “warts and all,” but protagonists and especially antagonists get humanized in ways easily accessible to contemporary viewers.⁴⁶ HBO’s *John Adams*, the 2008 six-part miniseries based upon David McCullough’s best-selling biography, exposed a complex John Adams to the broad audience the channel banked on. He is principled and irascible, brilliant and insecure, but when bewigged Paul Giamatti (the actor who plays Adams) defends British soldiers in the trial following the Boston Massacre, he does not mock the crowd they fired upon as “a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tars” as the real Adams had.⁴⁷ That would be unacceptable for a twenty-first-century hero in a multicultural age, and so it is elided. Similarly, in *Liberty’s Kids*, Washington and Jefferson express appropriate regret over slavery. To be charitable to the makers of *Liberty’s Kids*, perhaps this was a necessary artifact of producing something that would be historical and didactic, a usable past for an egalitarian present.

In its flouting of some conventions and its reflection of others, *Liberty’s Kids* dovetails closely with other televised interpretations of the American Revolution, like A&E’s 2002 *The Crossing*.⁴⁸ Whether for children or for adults, television history usually relies on personification of broad and complex historical phenomena – through the use of both actual and fictional characters to represent broader, messier movements – and on moving stories along quickly so as not to tax short attention spans.⁴⁹ Unlike much children’s

⁴⁵ O’Donnell, interview with author, telephone, 5 Feb. 2009.

⁴⁶ Mimi White analyzes a character very similar to (if slightly older than) Sarah and describes the portrayal as multicultural postfeminist in “Masculinity and Femininity in Television’s Historical Fictions: ‘Young Indiana Jones Chronicles’ and ‘Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman,’” in Edgerton and Rollins, *Television Histories*, 37–58; Tony Wilson, *Watching Television: Hermeneutics, Reception, and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1993), 33–39.

⁴⁷ Frederic Kidder and John Adams, *History of the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1870), 255.

⁴⁸ *The Crossing* (A&E Home Video, 2002).

⁴⁹ As several observers note, some television narrative structures have become quite complex, regardless of the depth of the underlying material. See Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” *Velvet Light Trap*, 58, 1 (2006), 29–40;

television in the US, in *Liberty's Kids* British accents are not always associated with evil, and characters with minority accents are not always presented as less intelligent than those whose speech sounds more white and proper. Mostly, though, it fits snugly with other recent onscreen interpretations of the Revolution. One subtle form of portraying diversity that appeared in *Liberty's Kids* was the inclusion of women and blacks in crowd scenes, thus showing a more diverse early America than previous generation's television had. Similarly, other recent shows have been more inclusive than previous depictions of the Revolution in their material culture – especially when, in *John Adams*, broadside notices of runaway slaves are noticeably plastered up in public places – and in their depiction of crowds judiciously peppered with black faces among the white ones. Nonetheless, like so many other television shows about history, these recent efforts eschew a deeper understanding of broad-based, messy movements in favor of personification and empathy for grand individuals.⁵⁰ They reflect a broader cultural memory resulting from the synthesis of many sources, academic and curricular as well as from broadcast and film. In general, contemporary American culture remembers the struggle for representative government but not the struggle over it. It celebrates heroes without examining the mass of people, preparations, and movements far more powerful than any one individual. And it commemorates progress toward racial and gender equality while giving short shrift to the enduring legacy of class and class differences in American society.⁵¹

In accordance with broader cultural memory and the medium's imperatives, the *Liberty's Kids* series ultimately provides what Rakove called a “high federalist” story that reflects the diversity of American experiences without the diversity of its ideas. *Liberty's Kids* primarily centers on the national government (which was by and large run by men who would become Federalists) as opposed to local or state-level struggles (where Anti-federalists were more likely to hold sway), focusses on Washington and a narrow array of military leaders, and contrasts the noble suffering of enlisted men (but not their desire for a more directly elected government) with the pettiness of squabbling politicians (without noting that many of their debates were grounded in profound differences).⁵² While *Liberty's Kids* humanizes the

Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1–35.

⁵⁰ S. Anderson, “History TV and Popular Memory,” in Edgerton and Rollins, *Television Histories*, 19–36.

⁵¹ Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano, “‘Famous Americans’: The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes,” *Journal of American History*, 94, 4 (March 2008), 1186–1202.

⁵² Rakove, interview with author; McIntyre, interview with author.

debates concerning independence, it avoids thorny questions of how the federal government should be structured, and, just as crucially, who should do the structuring. The show's portrayals of the "Fort Wilson" incident and Shays's Rebellion show this flatness most starkly. To the writers' credit, each depicts poor people's plights with great sympathy. A struggling Philadelphia mother has difficulty affording food for her children while merchants hoard goods; a Massachusetts farmer and veteran gets dragged out of court, sobbing, as his farm is ordered repossessed. But in each case, grievants move quickly to rage-induced violence pictured in unsympathetic ways – notwithstanding, ironically, the more heroic depiction of organized, military violence in the name of national independence. Rather than exploring the idea that the protests were a struggle to preserve an egalitarian revolutionary spirit their participants saw slipping away, the series reduces them to a mob. To revolt against a king in the name of popular sovereignty might be patriotic, but, in *Liberty's Kids*, to question a government that invokes the people as its source of authority is only portrayed as irrational.⁵³

That said, *Liberty's Kids* suffers no fewer but no more blind spots than recent scholars' syntheses of the American Revolution, suggesting that the difficulty may lie less with the medium and more with the material. All of them are framed politically, each with a different emphasis. Gordon Wood's *American Revolution: A History* elegantly distills the Revolution as a transformation from a hierarchal, republican society to a more egalitarian, liberal polity – but by projecting over all "Americans" the sentiments of the mostly northeastern, mostly elite men whose worldview Wood analyzed.⁵⁴ John Ferling's *A Leap in the Dark* and Edward Countryman's *American Revolution* consider ideas as well as delineate regional and factional differences – but present a Revolution in which slavery plays little part, much less slaves (and Ferling's early America is not much more diverse than Wood's).⁵⁵ Gary Nash's *The Unknown Revolution* and Ray Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution* accomplish nothing if not to explore the varied experiences of the American Revolution – but starve their Revolution of high-level politics, of diplomacy, and of strategy, and, for Raphael, of ideas, except to

⁵³ To some extent, the irrationality of revolting against a government "by the people and for the people" reflects the interpretation of Edmund Sears Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988).

⁵⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*, Modern library edn, (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

⁵⁵ John E. Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

the extent to which poor people suffer from their implementation.⁵⁶ That these top-notch historians, having nearly endless print at their disposal, have not come up with a more satisfying synthesis of the American Revolution indicates that *Liberty's Kids's* interpretation, while perhaps somewhat less coherent, should not be judged too harshly.

As *Liberty's Kids* demonstrates more starkly than does academic history, presenting a multicultural American Revolution ironically conceals the inequities that the underlying ends of multiculturalism aim to address; that is, structural limits to individual agency based often explicitly on perceived cultural, religious, racial, or gendered characteristics. Several times in the series, Moses explains his devotion to the American cause as eventually leading to all people's liberty. And while it is a commonplace of the national narrative of the United States, both inside and outside the academy, that the American Revolution and its ideals led eventually to the abolition of slavery, such a contention does not hold up to logical scrutiny.⁵⁷ Slavery was crumbling in Britain as of the Somerset decision of 1773, which de facto resulted in emancipation there; Britain outlawed slavery in all its empire in 1837; and in the western hemisphere, the United States was the penultimate polity of all to outlaw slavery, and only then through the contingency of civil war. Not only does *Liberty's Kids* barely question the structural impediments to equality, the series can only interpret as irrational the thoughts and actions of those historical actors whose sensibilities conflict with our own: Cato's master does little more than snarl at the proposition of freedom for blacks, thus reducing most slaveholders to a caricature of evil. In the calculation of authors and scriptwriters, that people who lost not a blink of sleep over buying, selling, and brutalizing other human beings nonetheless in other contexts may have been intelligent, rational, charming, and even caring seems too much of a leap for audiences to make. If the only slave we know, Cato, can run away to freedom, and the only girl we know, Sarah, can do as she pleases, then eighteenth-century America becomes only distinguishable from twenty-first-century America in its hairstyles and hemlines.

Liberty's Kids laudably pulls off the cloak of invisibility popular culture had thrown over African Americans, Native Americans, women, Jews, and Hispanics in the Revolutionary era, and reveals that their goals were not always the same as national ones. But it does so at the price of obscuring the

⁵⁶ Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005); Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: New Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 14; Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 195–200.

possibility of understanding the structures that bound them, much less the architects, builders, and maintainers of those structures. Nonetheless, Americans of nearly all backgrounds can watch *Liberty's Kids* and see themselves as participants in their nation's founding, and thus as participants in the continued construction of the United States. And that was its creators' goal: the American Revolution as a fully shared cultural experience. As is typical in television history, then, watching *Liberty's Kids* is like looking at one's image on the back of a shiny spoon: distorted, but nonetheless providing a recognizable, unique likeness of the nation's founding process very dependent upon the angle one is looking from. There is still the Revolution of founders with quill pens and generals leading armies, but now alongside an American dream – or, perhaps, American delusion – of the possibilities of freedom and equality in terms of ethnicity, race, and gender.