Citizenship as Method

To orient readers in the extralegal approach to citizenship taken up in this book, Chapter 1 outlines the fractured legal conceptualization of citizenship at length so that it can more convincingly leave behind a way of thinking about the relationship between literature, law, and political history that might otherwise haunt this study: the notion that the law (and official history writ large) is a relatively coherent realm of order and normativity and that fiction and other imaginative traditions are resistant genres that disrupt the political status quo.37 This oppositional theory of the politics of literature is an outgrowth of romanticism’s own aspirational association of the imagination with dissent.38 And in theory, it celebrates literature, insofar as it associates the literary with protest, critique, and progress. Yet in practice, it flattens history and literature alike by figuring each as phenomenologically discrete realms, structured by reality and description, on the one hand, and poiesis and creation, on the other. By focusing on the political tropes that are common to a number of different genres, this book seeks to offer a dynamic understanding of fiction’s political power without reinforcing the medium-specific triumphalism that haunts comparative formulations of the politics of fiction, wherein “history” is tacitly rigidified to emphasize the radical, revisionary nature of fiction.

Part of the methodological gambit of this study writ large is to illuminate the formative political power of aesthetics—a power that has been difficult to address in literary criticism, which has, for several decades, turned to historicism in search of something more solid and “real” than the complexities of “literary ambiguity.”39 As several literary critics have observed, in the wake of deconstruction, which enjoyed its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, literary criticism began to move away from the formalist interpretative practices associated with “close reading”—which increasingly was spurned as outmoded, historically myopic, and dangerously apolitical. In the decades that followed, formalist practices did not disappear altogether, but the confluence of a number of factors—including the rise of the cultural studies paradigm and the methodological dominance of “new historicism”—helped situate the practice of historical contextualization as a disciplinary “virtue.”40 The problem with this is that, for literary critics, this “disciplinary virtue” is not obviously “our” disciplinary virtue; it is one that historians monopolize, by training. As a result, the rise of historical contextualization in literary criticism helped solidify what Eric
Slaughter, Elizabeth Dillon, and others have aptly described as the “trade deficit” between English and history, in which literary critics perennially import the work of historians with little to no citational reciprocity.41

Literary criticism’s one-way disciplinary love affair with history is a natural extension of the methodological assumptions that underwrite the text/context model of history and the related “revisionist” model of the politics of literature.42 When we talk about how a particular work of fiction expresses or disrupts the cultural norms that governed politics in the period in which it was written, we presume that the happenings of “history” have enough internal consistency that they can be treated as a unified historical context—which, in turn, becomes the interpretative “ground zero” for analyzing the political and historical stakes of specific works of literature. In theory, historical contextualization need not privilege some kinds of texts over others. In etymological terms, contextualization (from con- “together” + texere “to weave”) simply describes reading a text together—and, in the case of historical contextualization, with “history.” However, the very notion of reading “with” history implies that texts are not part of the textual fabric of history from the very beginning.43 And in practice, fiction and other imaginative traditions tend to be marginalized in this interpretative regime, because they do not presume to describe things as they already are (as history does) and because they cannot channel the state’s institutional authority to compel compliance (as the law does).44

This book uses the prehistory of citizenship to see anew the historical and political importance of literature, broadly understood, as well as the text-based interpretative methods that have developed and evolved in relationship to changing assumptions about the cultural power of letters. The extralegal traditions of citizenship traced in the following chapters are all openly speculative. They do not aspire to the descriptive neutrality of the indicative, and they do not carry the imperative force to command obedience. Yet they enjoy a different kind of power. Their political efficacy resides in subjunctive formulations—where the possible (what might or could be) and the prescriptive (what should or ought to be) collide in language that seeks to compel by persuasion. The “political subjunctive,” as I designate this aspirational mode of politicking, concretizes different ways of envisioning political membership that have clear implications for how it might or should be defined, but nonetheless lack the law’s coercive power.45 The subjunctive offers a uniquely instructive paradigm for understanding the political power of rhetoric writ large, because—in keeping with the methodological ambitions of the chapters that follow—its modal (rather than generic) framework isolates the speculative mode that fiction exemplifies but that also structures a number of other cultural forms.
The grammatical mood of the subjunctive has gradually fallen out of common usage in English, but the aspirational impulse to which it lends formal idiomatic support has never lost its insistent hold on the political imaginaries of the United States, which, as with Walt Whitman’s hopeful vision of the future of democracy in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), has been almost painfully oriented toward the fantastic promise of political perfectibility. Sometimes this aspirational “civic longing” took the inverted form of nostalgia, which projects political futures backward through idealized pasts. Yet whether they looked to an imagined past or to a possible future, the subjunctive orientation of the extralegal discourses of citizenship made them uniquely responsive to the definitional problem that shaped debates about citizenship in the early United States. As many early U.S. political commentators recognized, citizenship was “open to argument and to speculative criticism” well into the 1860s, and the very things that might make these traditions seem a little less impactful or serious today proved to be the source of their unique power. Their tendency toward conjecture, supposition, and even fantasy—freed them from the burden of trying to account for citizenship as it already *was*, allowing them to invent its meaning anew, again and again.