Preface: Claims

Thus in the beginning all the world was America and more than that is now; for no such thing as money was anywhere known. Find out something that has the use and value of money amongst his neighbors, you shall see the same man will begin presently to enlarge his possessions.

—John Locke, "Of Property,"
The Second Treatise of Government (1690)

The significance of a business is not wholly an affair of its statistics. This note is written lightly and is intended to touch the imagination, because that seems to be the best way to come quickly to the point. The objective of all of us is to live in a world in which nothing unpleasant can happen. Our prime instinct is to go on indefinitely like the wax flowers on the mantelpiece. Insurance is the most easily understood geometry for calculating how to bring the thing about. . . . It helps us to see the actual world to visualize a fantastic world.

—Wallace Stevens, "Insurance and Social Change"

To have [. . .] this pleasure, I suppose one must, at a given moment, stand at the limit of catastrophe or of the risk of loss. Otherwise, one is only applying a surefire program. So, one must take risks. That's what experience is. I use this word in a very grave sense. There would be no experience otherwise, without risk. But for the risk to be worth the trouble . . . and for it to be really risked or risking, one must take this risk with all the insurance possible. That is, one must multiply the assurances, have the most lucid possible consciousness of all the systems of insurance, all the norms, all that can limit the risks, one must explore the terrain of these assurances: their history, their code, their norms in order to bring them to the edge of the risk in the surest way possible. One has to be sure that the risk is taken. And to be sure that the risk is taken, one has to negotiate with the assurances. . . . What I am calling here assurance or insurance are all the codes, the values, the norms we were just talking about and that regulate philosophical discourse: the philosophical institution, the values of coherence, truth, demonstration, etc.

—Jacques Derrida, "There Is No 'One' Narcissism"

First, the proposition that epigraphs may underwrite new claims: John Locke, philosophical underwriter of a large share of Enlightenment thought about property, and Wallace Stevens, poetic underwriter of a latter-day imaginative philosophy, place us in a network of imagination, money, and American legacies—the same concerns I pursue in this book. Stevens's wry insight into "prime instincts" suggests his belief in the power of the imagination to do work upon the material world. This doctrine is perhaps not surprising, since his work, his "actual" work, was with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company; the essay I quote from, "Insurance and Social Change," was written for the company magazine, the *Hartford Agent*.[1] Stevens was a booster and defender of the enterprise of insurance, but not uncritically so.

For Stevens, the business of insurance tantalizes us with a "primal" and final promise: that insurance can help to realize perfection. But it is a particular kind of perfection, based in representational stasis (poised ironically and necessarily against the idea of "social change"). The insuring guarantee constitutes a "waxing" preservation, a valuable arrest of the changing unfenceable world that may grow larger still but never die or contract. Insurance offers Locke's "America" perpetually remade by new species of irreversible value and possession, fostering fantasies of an accretive world of abundance. Nurtured by envious neighbors—the very engine of middle-class property acquisition—such hopes grow in places where no thing is ever lost.[2] In the insured fantasy of everyday policyholders, perfection resides within the promise of a replaceable totality. The underwritten property (which may include life itself), with its profoundly inclusive and quantum logic, implies even more—the possibility of an underwritten world at large. Underwritten property is, in concept and deed, the perfect colonizing instrument.[3]

And though a completed world may be summoned by insurance's effective geometry, Stevens understands the absurd lack of dimension and perspective involved in the underwriting method. The grandiosity of such mundane and belittled pursuits as insurance underwriting provokes the embarrassed caution of announcing the "lightness" of his "note." In an embalmed world, made still and symmetrical by drab business-gray procedures, insurance successfully calculates the necessary connection between utopian figures and all material satisfactions. Whether that now-valued entity is human life, house, ship, nation, community, or corporation, insurance is truly hopeful, imaginative, and (as sometimes advertised) comprehensive.

Yet there is an even more disturbing element to Stevens's still life. What kind of "hope" is this? In typically oblique and quietly comic ways, Stevens implies nature's resistance to the imposing demands of capital's relentlessly "pleasant" economies. The poetics of an insured world is regrettable but strangely attractive, subtly designed yet insidiously forceful. How fixed do we really want this

world, how resistant to negative change? What is really "lost" in a world where nothing, by a stroke of artifice, is ever lost?[4] Witness the distant pun on "objective"—critiquing perhaps the fetish, even as he exalts the universal commodifying logic of bonded values. Stevens's insured world suggests a Faustian divided mind.

Why do I begin here, over fifty years after the scope of my study ends? Because Stevens's usefully divided mind—no doubt closely correlated to his dual expertise as poet and insurance executive—performs a critical service. It tenders the strange possibility of a meaningful cultural history of the relationship between insurance and literature. Stevens's musings on insurance and social change intimate knowledge of the problematic artificiality of signified value, both monetary and literary. For my purposes, his insight into how insurance pursues a world of stable and lasting value helps explain why insurance became increasingly important and profitable in eighteenth-century America. In addition, the passage begins to make conceptual and historical linkages to America's other major writing business: literature. Unlikely as it may sound, the problems and hopes of insurance are no less those of the literary imagination.

Obviously, this book's topic has an audacious starting claim: the four main divisions of the insurance business—marine, fire, life, and accident—may be viewed as essential to a material, ideological, and aesthetic reckoning with the emergence of American literature.[5] This assertion may seem more or less plausible depending on the depth of meaning and influence one grants a single form of business enterprise. Spencer Kimball, a scholar of insurance law, uncannily echoes Stevens in lending exponential powers of representation to the practice of insurance underwriting: "Insurance is a small world that reflects the purposes of the larger world outside it."[6] I hope to persuade those who choose not to invest this set of concerns with that importance by opening with an axiom Stevens would probably find banal but very familiar: insurance is a writing business, one of the first. It articulates a seemingly indissoluble representational nexus between property and text, attempting to mark and reconcile these two cornerstones of capitalist logic.[7] This enunciation can be viewed, in turn, as crucial to the development of certain kinds of social and cultural value, aesthetic or monetary, in colonial, early national, and antebellum America.

Because it is a "writing business," insurance also invites comparisons and critical connections with the cultures of writing, whether dictionaries or grammars or poetic elegies, whether autobiography or advertisements for public financing or fictional responses to accidents. This book will sketch out the relationship between insurance and literature by seeking to understand both as material and conceptual artifacts. With respect to commercial underwriting, I

want to understand how property and text were linked and thereby inscribed with monetary values that would endure through contracted guarantees against loss. In the literature of Phillis Wheatley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville, the echoes of commercial life are found in tropes of loss and possession, themes of anxiety and risk, and the evolving and intricately cross-calibrated mechanics of self-mastery and genius. For the authors in this study who are not strictly bellelettristic—Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster—the overlap between commercial and rhetorical discourses is sometimes more obvious.

In America, the poetics of underwriting fostered an understanding of creative originality and authority that had property ownership as its primary ground, and the loss of property as a constant source of anxiety. Perhaps more so than in other national literary cultures, writers in the United States have been asked to worry about the political economy of the imagination, about what they own and how they own it. The authors who are part of this study are but strong cases in a wider cultural logic in which business discourses persistently challenge and assist literary conventions. As writing that successfully translates material commodities, as well as the precisely narrativized eventualities of their fates, into real value, insurance underwriting asks us to grasp what literary and personal ownership might mean for American writers.

This book's introductory chapter presents a theoretical and historical overview, describing the critical term "underwriting" while tracing its historical emergence as both idea and practice within the sociocultural past. The introduction is followed by five chapters organized around four major commercial centers in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America: Philadelphia (Franklin), Boston (twice—once for Wheatley and again, in an admittedly more regionalized sense, for Emerson), Hartford (Webster), and New York (Melville). Each city has a quietly powerful commercial history of localized partnerships that drew on the social energies of the clubbable, pre-corporate, and then corporate republic of letters and news. I hope to reposition the authors as significant participants in a distillation of urbanized texts, read through time, from place to place.

The stories I develop depict a struggle that appears on a larger scale as part of a classic commercial rise to dominance, and on another as the less visible spread of a cultural sublogic of capitalism. Each author and city demonstrates how that struggle takes place and to what extent the logic of underwriting is furthered. Again, the narrative is an uncelebratory success story, since this book concerns the rise of what has become an undeniably powerful business enterprise. Insurance underwriting, as both idea and practice, makes its claim on American culture historically, and today it is very nearly ubiquitous. The broader meaning of underwriting—as a system that helped enable the eco-

nomic circulation of literary property, that developed the poetics of loss as literary preoccupation and structure, and that secured some of the modern terms of authorship—is told by readings of particular local and personal capacities.

Underwriting also contains intense contradictions, areas of ongoing uncertainty, and a quality of loss that its representational methods cannot ultimately secure. A critical narrative that ignored this would risk accepting success on its own terms, thereby denying a historical unevenness that is hard to see, much less script. This is where literary and commercial underwritings noticeably diverge, for I think literary discourses have tracked and portrayed quite nicely what commercial underwriting has left to courts and statutes. Indeed, what we have come to see as "literature" (the set of texts we have declared, on reaching back, to be more valuable) makes loss its business, and no less than insurance does. Therein lies the greatest thematic connection between literature and insurance, and also their most differentially empowered textual claim. While I do not want to imply in this book that five authors constitute the absolute beginning and end of a broader New History, I maintain that this methodology corresponds to and clarifies the rough irregularity of economic and legal contexts. Using a literary critical scope is one way to undo the pleasant narratives of capital.

Perhaps the best proof that the economic frame I'm using cannot deliver smooth uncontested history is that the story of underwriting—as I have constructed it out of authors, texts, and events—is also one of failure. Such might be expected of any regime of thought that drafts, incorporates, and sells utopian promises. Franklin's representative poetics of self-protective identity is, to be blunt, impossible as anything other than the cultivation of a mystique—women are widowed, buildings burn, a son still dies. Webster's attempts to foundationalize identity, language, and money were and are continuously thwarted by statute, commercial practice, and linguistic flux. Wheatley's nominal and even legal freedom and self-possession can be cleverly obtained or signified through writing, but she cannot manage the broader terms of freedom in a racist society for all the lyrics in her catalog. The designs and promises of Franklin's and Webster's age fail Melville in his attempt to find safety as a writer with less and less market confidence. Emerson's loss of a son can, to some extent, be healed, and he can eventually find words for profound irrevocable loss; but the son can never be truly underwritten. Out of loss, it is hard to make promises. Representation and experience are never as complete and reliable as money and writing aspire to be.

In the first chapter, I begin recovering a relatively obscure part of Franklin's undertakings, namely, his writing on fire and widows' insurance. I use these pro-

jects as a basis for examining how Franklin copes with loss-derived anxiety. In its focus on the peculiarly general absence of fear in Franklin's writing (and especially *The Autobiography*), the chapter sets the analytic terms—risk, loss, and publicity—for issues that govern the poetics of underwriting through the mid-nineteenth century. It also begins to show the communitarian dimensions of the poetics of underwriting, locating Franklin's thinking about such projects in a specifically urban (not yet national) context.

Robert Jerry has described the essence of insurance underwriting as "the primary mechanism by which economic actors in our society transfer risk and distribute loss"(2).[8] Franklin's various endeavors may be viewed as an array of tactics to achieve similar ends. Franklin is essential to any discussion of the power of commerce and print textuality in America, as much for his vaunted optimism in the face of uncertainty as for his practical innovations in business and science. Franklin's social world has voided the notion of trauma—for him, almost everything is readable and printable because traumatic loss, that sinkhole of fear and illegibility, has been successfully removed or mastered.

The second chapter leads from this discussion of Franklin as representative underwriter into the disruptions that occur in 1770's Boston amid the problematic mix of political economy, Christianity, and race. I am particularly interested in how these disturbances serve Phillis Wheatley, a poet who manipulated the changing discourses afforded her by both the commercial and lyric figures of property and loss. This chapter reads both Wheatley's elegiac verse and the authenticity controversy of her 1773 London edition of poetry within the context of her status as a slave, understanding race as a category that began to reverse the bonds of economic determinations because underwriting transformed the meaning of property itself. I contend that Wheatley performed the strange task of property (that is, Wheatley as chattel) underwriting itself, as well as the lives of property owners.

In this part of the study, I trace the racial distortions of white notions of authenticity, originality, poetic genius, and life itself (as a commodity to be possessed and redeemed). I also show how Wheatley's poetics make apparent a material world of inevitable loss that may be successfully offset by the verbalizations of one whose dispossession allows her a different kind of knowledge about property. Wheatley's trauma of loss is not only readable and ongoing, but that very trauma manages to underwrite the distances between material property and imaginative free spaces. This poetics of repossession is unique to someone who, over and over, had to script her own sovereignty. Nonetheless the poetics is not so exceptional as to disqualify other "real world" applications; Wheatley's case offers a new perspective on how insurance underwriting contributed to new economic arguments for abolitionism.

In the chapter on Hartford and Noah Webster, I make connections between Webster's linguistic nationalism (represented by his best-selling American grammars and dictionaries, his advocacy of national copyright law, and his commentary on monetary and credit policies) and the establishment of Hartford as the capital of the American insurance industry. Webster's obsession with the structural foundations of language and national identity augments the poetics of underwriting by a rather transparent analogy that depends on a broad reading of the term "social contract." In contrast to Franklin, Webster's underwriting projects assume deliberately national and individualist dimensions, reflecting the more openly ideological nature of his textual theories. His work on the dictionary, and in favor of U.S. copyright law, argues for a view of language and commerce that was coextensive with an idea of the new American nation as fundamentally ordered by cultural and financial conservatism. The political economy of the book was rooted in the economy of insured words and values answering above all to the possessive individual. Webster's notion of lexical representation derives from the idea of insurance insofar as its efficacy arises from the underwritten link between property and text, a radical contractualism that binds thinking about language's propriety and the value of real property.

With Franklin and Webster, we see incipient moves to appropriate the socializing tendencies of capital accumulation and put them to the uses of individual ownership. Such civic-minded libertarianism amounts to the Adam Smith of the *Wealth of Nations* alone, without the tempering ethics of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The sympathies of Franklin and Webster are driven by abstractions derived from self-interest and incisive understandings of the structures of public outcomes, both men's impulses being inseparable from their own ongoing self-mythologies.

The chapter set in New York returns to the themes set out in the Franklin chapter. I portray Herman Melville in "The Lightning-Rod Man" (1854), as well as "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) and *The Confidence Man* (1857), placing scientific and legal discourses of safety and risk against the often comically absurd risks of ownership. These stories are read alongside the Harper Brothers fire of 1853, which caused Melville to rethink the stability of his career, not to mention the endurance of writing and authorship as market phenomena. As a result of the fire, Melville becomes much less complacent than Franklin or Webster about how writing secures either safety or property; indeed, he is radically skeptical. His pessimism stems not from scientific rationality or religious belief but from a kind of nihilistic humanism.

The chapter is also about the managing of probable loss, in contrast to the reckoning with actual loss. How, in short, does one prevent accidental loss, and can this prevention be effected by language at all? This part of my argument

elaborates probability's effects on the terms of knowledge in the nineteenth century. How does the new "predictability" return Melville to a brand of humanism paradoxically following from a commercialized mood of antisocial pessimism? Melville's resulting humanism was a lonely thing, ultimately silenced by the discourse of insurance, unable to find an American audience ready to meet tragedy in all its uncalculated complexity.

The final chapter, on Emerson, places us squarely in the moment when corporate culture began to place its final imprint on the culture of underwriting that I trace from Franklin. I read several important essays ("Self-Reliance," 1841, "Experience," 1844), poems ("Threnody," 1846), and books (*The Conduct of Life*, 1860) in the context of Emerson's personal instances of loss, especially the death of his son Waldo, in 1842, and the burning of his house, in 1872. During his life, Emerson moves from the notion that loss is fundamentally unrepresentable to the stolid idea that it can be represented in texts that might redeem the loss. Like Wheatley, Emerson is keen to underwrite the painful distance between representation and the thing itself. This successful struggle places Emerson at the threshold of corporate, non-self-reliant power—socialized individualism—whereas it left Wheatley manumitted but alone and still serving. Emerson's evolving thinking on the meaning of loss becomes an analog of how Americans begin to accept the concept of insurance as a financial necessity in all aspects of middle-class life.

Again, it should be apparent from the outline of the underwriting narrative that this may be read as a social history told as a sequence of situated problems. This manifold view of insurance offers a theoretical key to inquiry, denoted in my study by the term "underwriting."[9] In keeping with the speculative nature of the questions behind this work, the book comprises a web of various critical designs. It is a meditation on theories of writing, illuminating the structures of print and manuscript discourses, exploring a fertile and persuasive feature of American capitalism that came to determine the protocols by which texts enforce meanings with specific values. At the level of cultural and social history, this book examines the practices that made mutually defining modes of loss and reparation profitable and, occasionally, pleasurable. I hope that this book will reverse the skepticism engendered by its unlikely dispositions, and that the terms associated with the conceptual foundations of insurance—loss, risk, publicity—point to the social texts that exist above, beneath, and through American literature.

Underwriting

The Poetics of Insurance in America, 1722-1872