Is There An Early American Novel?

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As scholars from Leslie Fiedler to Philip Fisher have demonstrated, James Fenimore Cooper's frontier fiction lends itself to allegorical readings about the founding of a nation at once masculine and American in origin. An obvious tautology informs all such readings: if novels are about history—or should be, in order to qualify as the genuine American article—then we must look to history to tell us what these novels are about. Besides marginalizing so much of the fiction actually produced and consumed in the early republic, reading to validate our historical preconceptions is further disadvantaged by two faulty assumptions. First, allegory treats fiction as a coy, even deceptive text that offers a more fashionably dressed or locally targeted way of explaining what history—being based on fact—can say in a forthright manner. Moreover, to read allegorically, we must overlook the fact that history is a narrative too. Whether it explains how we overthrew an oppressive father/king, displaced an older European imperialism with our more recent brand, or transformed homegrown democracy into sovereignty in a global configuration of nations, literary criticism is updating the same old story. The consequences of undervaluing the early American novel and overvaluing twentieth-century historical accounts of nation-making are evident in the first volume of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature* (Bercovitch), which claims to cover major literary genres, styles, and topics and yet has next to nothing to say about novels written during the period of the Revolution and the founding of the new republic. Why is this reading method still so well entrenched?

To put it in a nutshell, turning fiction into historical allegory presupposes and maintains a typological culture. Especially in the age of historicism, modern literary scholars grant "history," in the orthodox sense, the status of what Fredric Jameson calls the "master narrative," or story of stories (2). The essays in this special issue invert what might be called the typological fallacy—the supposition that a master narrative about the history of the nation precedes and outlasts any individual articulation. Granting ideology the capacity to choreograph both history and fiction, they argue that the notion of history as an empirically grounded narrative whose truth claims are distinct from and superior to fiction is a relatively recent development. Modern history can't provide an interpretative grid onto which to map most novels written in the United States before Cooper. To subordinate literature to history is, by implication, to endorse the establishment and development of the "nation" as fiction's referent and the basis of interpretation. To privilege this category when there were neither modern nations nor narratives recounting their development, the contributors agree, is to substitute our own ideology for the one we ought to be discovering in the fiction of the early republic. In order to avoid this fallacy, the essays to follow collapse the opposition between narratives that are usually classified as fictions and those said to be based on fact, and entertain, instead, the possibility that the texts may not fit any

preconceived notion of what story an American novel must tell. In this way, these essays give us some chance of recovering, if not history, then at least the storytelling exigencies of the early republic.

In her essay on *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) Cathy Davidson dismisses evidence that challenges Equiano's claims to having been born in Africa. She argues that it really doesn't matter whether he falsified his birthplace or not. Indeed, *The Interesting Narrative* is no less history, she argues, for mobilizing the conventions of eighteenth-century autobiographical narratives right down to and including a possible shift in the author's putative birthplace from South Carolina to Africa. So what if *The Interesting Narrative* combines "slave narrative, sea yarn, military adventure, ethnographic reportage, historical fiction, travelogue, picaresque saga, sentimental novel, allegory, tall tale, pastoral origin myth, Gothic romance, conversion tale, and abolitionist tract" (19)? It's more than likely that an eighteenth-century autobiographer would not have had access to all the facts, and if a slave, he might well have had very good reasons for disguising the truth as he saw it. To insist that Equiano tell a story that conforms to a modern notion of fact—and only certain facts qualify as historical fact according to this notion[1]—is exactly how a typological culture ensures that individual stories, whether fiction or history, will by and large repeat the culture's master narrative. Davidson regards Equiano as something like an artisan who used the conventions the culture made available to him to fashion an account of his life that placed him within an Atlantic community of discourse. To those who are unable to imagine this standard for historical truth, Davidson suggests, half in jest, that we claim Equiano as one of "the Father[s] of the American Novel" (25). Imagine, she speculates, "what it would do to the early American literary canon if it began with Equiano. Consider the interesting symmetry if the two first American novels, both published in 1789, were *The Interesting Narrative* and William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*" (26). What would this pairing tell us concerning the way early American readers understood their participation in a British culture that encircled the Atlantic world?

Edward Larkin's discussion of Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) brings us to the heart of the problem. Crèvecoeur's *Letters* is foisted on freshmen as the quintessential statement of American society's uniqueness. As Larkin notes, the editor of a popular edition goes so far as to describe *Letters* as the beginning of American literature and "the voice of our national consciousness" (qtd. in Larkin 55). Larkin breaks from a long-standing tradition of literary and historical scholarship when he asks us to take seriously the fact that the narrator, Farmer James, is not the author of *Letters* but the creation of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. During the Revolution, Crèvecoeur left his family and returned to Europe, while Farmer James relocates his family to an Indian village in the backcountry (Larkin 71). It took a series of "strategic misreadings," in Larkin's view, to turn this epistolary novel into a sociological tract and then use it for "evidence of the existence of an American national identity prior to the Revolution" (61). In order to make sense of this novel as if it were a factual account of the political view of Americans at that time, scholarship has had to work

[1] See Poovey 218-36.

around the fact that Farmer James is opposed to the Revolution. Going so far as to suggest that the author suffered a nervous breakdown, some scholars have invented ingenious ways of accounting for the complacent tone of those letters written before July 1776 and the despair afflicting the later letters written after the onset of the Revolution. If we read this text as a Loyalist novel rather than as a nationalist tract, however, the need for establishing its autobiographical integrity vanishes. Even the framework of the novel-like correspondence between an American farmer and a landed English gentleman suddenly makes sense as a Loyalist fantasy of an Atlantic world in which a simple American farmer could be in cordial correspondence with an erudite British landowner. Where history disposes us to assume that someone so opposed to the Revolution must be driven by a commitment to British nationalism, it is perfectly possible to read this text, as Larkin does, as an epistolary novel produced by a Loyalist who opposed the Revolution and yet considered himself a true American.

All of the essays that comprise this special issue perform something akin to this move, as they reverse the relationship between some historical narrative that twentieth-century scholars have retroactively invested with explanatory power and the fiction written during the early republic. Collectively, they argue that history has glossed over and marginalized the very material that might problematize and even perhaps revise the progressive narrative of nation formation, imperialism, and globalization.

When they consider it at all, historians and critics approach Leonora Sansay's *Secret History, or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) as a naïve account of the slave rebellion in Haiti told by a woman more interested in describing illicit assignations and unhappy marriages among the colonial elite than in chronicling the bloody struggle between masters and slaves that gave birth to an independent nation. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon uses the novel to redirect critical understanding away from allegories about nation formation and toward the pressing concerns of creole populations who sought to make a home for themselves in the Americas. In marked contrast to the kind of novel that Benedict Anderson celebrates in his *Imagined Communities*, the *Secret History* situates itself both inside and outside the modern nation-state as characters travel not only from Philadelphia to Saint Domingue but also from there to Jamaica and Cuba. Given the novel's date and setting, we might expect a novel with these geographical parameters to recount the conflicts leading up to one of the most important slave rebellions in colonial America, but Sansay defies those expectations. She packages this moment in history as a "secret history" or a *roman à clef*, that makes us privy to the intricacies of the courtship practices among the colonial elite and the libertinage of the French colonial military commanders. Indeed, the "secret" to which the subtitle of this novel alludes is the violence committed under the cover of marriage (92). Here, then, events connecting race, politics, patriarchy, and colonialism take the form of a narrative suppressed by histories intent on detaching political conflict from the rituals ensuring cultural reproduction. The novel would seem to offer a different set of possibilities, when it depicts a community of women separate and free from the oppression of patriarchy and slavery and

imagines relations with Europe giving way to alliances among creole populations in the New World.

Ezra Tawil's essay takes on the question of why literary historians and critics through most of the twentieth century were so determined to read Charles Brockden Brown's novels first as exempla of American exceptionalism and then, in recent years, as anti-exceptionalist. Rather than take up either position himself, Tawil challenges the opposition, arguing that if Brown did produce "an early version of literary exceptionalism, he did so, paradoxically, out of given European materials" (105). From the Renaissance through the eighteenth century, he notes, European aesthetic theory regularly mined travel accounts and "turned to American examples and imagery to convey the extremes of aesthetic experience" (111). The relationship was reciprocal. When American writers sought to establish a uniquely American literary style, they went to European arguments to discover what such European philosophers as Kant, Edmund Burke, or Hugh Blair celebrated. In this manner, Tawil claims, "eighteenth-century arguments for American literary nationalism were quite explicitly shaped by ... European culture" (105), making it impossible to read the tropes of exceptionalism as the mark of truly American literature.

Amanda Emerson reads Brockden Brown's novels as the site of the novel's quarrel with eighteenth-century historiography. Emerson examines Brockden Brown's commentary on the history writing of his time to indicate his frustration with historians' diehard fidelity to "fact" even though facts chronically failed to get at the truth of the event. Where historians saw it as their job to portray the major characters and describe the great events of history, in Emerson's view, Brockden Brown and his contemporaries found such writing to fall short of the mark. Although, as she puts it, he recognized that "history writing spells one important way to educate members of the new nation in the manner, duties, and dangers of modern republican citizenship" (127), he also saw the novel as "the superior vehicle for *truth*" (126). Because, in his view, romance was "best equipped to impart coherency and legitimacy to the new nation's ideals," he quite deliberately embedded historical narratives within historical narratives and contained them in a fictional framework designed to undermine their facticity—and with it, the premise that the truth of the new United States can be told in a single, internally coherent narrative.

Jonathan Elmer's essay spells out the opposition between the national narrative and a novel like John Neal's *Logan, the Mingo Chief: A Family History* (1822). Elmer argues that Neal's Logan—the second Logan—is a figure of the last survivor of the deterritorialization that occurred as settlers moved westward, laying claim to the land and exterminating indigenous peoples. The figure of the sole surviving Indian finds its way into Cooper's fiction as the stand-in for the lost original that signals the completion of the mourning process: loss is acknowledged; the indigenous people who have died in clashes with settlers in the westward migrations are integrated into our history by means of this symbolic substitution; and we move on (158-60). Cooper's willingness to use the Indian in this way no doubt has something to do with his popularity and our own willingness to use him to anchor a history of the American novel. Neal's novel runs

completely contrary to this tradition. His account begins with the infamous slaughter of Logan's family whose descendants proliferate to continue a cycle of retribution based on racial conflict. Though dead, Logan lives on as that which belongs to the national body but cannot be assimilated into it. Neal brings the Mingo warrior back to life as the Englishman George of Salisbury who poses as the Indian Logan. This split between Englishman and Indian stands in for a division within the social body that cannot be aesthetically synthesized. In this sense, Elmer contends, Neal's novel constitutes a refusal to mourn.

Melancholia keeps the object outside and apart, as if alive, and so refuses to acknowledge the loss. Judith Butler describes this mechanism as a way both to deny the loss and to internalize it: "If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and that internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss" (134). By incorporating loss, melancholia preserves the difference between self and other, making the acceptance of the loss impossible. As Elmer concludes, "[t]he mystery of the name Logan is that despite the multiplicities to which its history attests, it can still encrypt a dream of some fact, event, or identity that lies outside surrender and exchange, a dream that must be placed into an inaccessible past to be sustained." On the basis of *Logan*, *Letters from an American Farmer*, *Secret History*, and even Brockden Brown's novels, one can neither see the germ of Cooper nor predict what would come to be known as the American Renaissance.

II

There is consequently no literary-critical field called the early American novel. At least, no such field has existed until very recently, when scholars began to look to fiction for something other than confirmation of modern historiography. True, the past two decades have seen a concerted editorial effort to expand the American canon and even to account for the fact that the life of the colonies was conducted in several languages. But the early American novel, by and large, has found no place in this reclamation project. To date, we have no literary-critical study of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American novel comparable, for example, to Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*, which shows how certain narratives of individual development both accompanied and reflected the emergence and development of the genre, the readership, and ultimately Great Britain. *Revolution and the Word*, Cathy Davidson's epic study of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American fiction, works against this kind of simple developmental narrative where the novel begins from a single source and increases in breadth, sophistication, and coherence until it consolidates itself as a genre. Despite a notable increase in the number and variety of works selected for inclusion in the anthologies of American literature and other good-faith efforts to expand the canon, we are consequently committed to much the same story that we told twenty, forty, even sixty years ago: the new nation began in New England, consolidated its identity during the eighteenth century, sought political independence from Great Britain, and emerged from the Revolution with a richly diverse,

yet somehow coherent national culture that developed strictly and uniquely within the specific geographical boundaries of the United States. James Fenimore Cooper's novels fit this narrative like a glove and so provide a point where the novel can enter American literary history. But as I have suggested, the fiction of the early republic cannot be made to fit the pattern, and the essays in this issue, in laying claim to "the early American novel," must use this body of fiction to challenge the accuracy of the tradition that excludes it. Nor is this the first time scholars have championed an excluded body of literature.

Feminism rose to the challenge of Hawthorne's famous complaint to his publisher and friend, William B. Ticknor, concerning the popularity of "scribbling women" writers (9). Arguing for the cultural centrality of sentimental fiction, a number of prominent literary critics succeeded in supplementing the canon with such authors as Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster, Tabitha Tenney, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, and Lydia Maria Child, to name only a few. The scholarship turned up sufficient material to indicate that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers had an insatiable appetite for gothic fiction, sentimental novels, and seduction stories.[2] This demand made fiction-writing one of the few means by which literate women could support themselves and still belong to the respectable classes, thereby insuring the production of still more of the literature that earned Hawthorne's resentment. But even as they increased the number of authors and variety of texts, feminist critics could not change the narrative that recounted the growth of a national literature and the consolidation of a national identity. Sentimental literature encouraged readers to imagine sympathy uniting a diverse community of characters and thus encouraging fellow feeling among an equally diverse community of readers. To convince us that women were just as important to the development of the nation, this scholarship had to authorize the master narrative of developing nationhood. This option is not available to scholars of the early American novel.

Of the many reasons for excluding the early American novel from accounts of our national literature, three or four stand out. First, if the novels we must choose from strike readers as derivative—poor imitations of the more literary and much longer English counterparts—then it is understandably difficult to claim that a novel or novelists inaugurated a literary tradition. Second, few features of these novels overtly fix them to a geographical location within North America. *Charlotte Temple* (1791) is a case in point. Now considered an American novel, indeed the first American bestseller, scholars and teachers of American literature had not embraced it until feminism made it a *cause célèbre*. One of an astonishing number of novels in imitation of Richardson's *Clarissa* written on both sides of the Atlantic, this novel is neither as long nor as well wrought as Richardson's and thus still lingers in the shadow of the British prototype. The same can be said of the author. She was neither born in America, nor lived there when she wrote and first published her novel. Finally, in marked contrast to Cooper, *Charlotte Temple* offers nothing in the way of a unified or unifying national project, nor even the possibility of an America that is distinctly different from and superior to Britain, to indicate that the author was writing for and about Americans. The

[2] See Tennenhouse.

novel cannot imagine even rearing Charlotte's orphaned daughter in America and instead sends her back to her mother's home in England with her British grandfather.

The third and perhaps most obvious reason why it is difficult to make a field of the early American novel has to do with the material conditions of the book market itself: British fiction, both imported and reprinted in America, supplied most of the novels consumed by an American readership until at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Many of these novels, as in the case of the *Clarissa* imitations, were significantly redacted editions of the original, and, if the number of printings are any indication, they enjoyed considerable popularity in the new United States. It was much cheaper to print and purchase a redacted edition of *Pamela* or *Clarissa* that ran ninety to a hundred pages in octavo format than one that ran up to fifteen hundred pages.[3] The problem is compounded by the fact that American magazines reprinted far more British than American fiction. The magazines that did feature American fiction selected stories that were often hard to identify as having anything inherently American about their plots, settings, or thematic materials. During the height of the European craze for gothic fiction in the 1790s, British gothic novels were at least as popular in America as they were in Europe. In sum, a surplus of what could be considered British fiction—defined, for instance, by the failure to confine its plots to American geographies, the absence of any pretense at representing a unified American identity, the material conditions of production, and the difficulty of distinguishing British from American fictions to begin with—all make it difficult to say what is distinctively American about the early American novel. The problem is aggravated by an unwitting critical conspiracy to mention this substantial body of fiction only in passing, and then to begin accounts of the "true" American novel with Cooper.

Because this collection is one of the first to address the early American novel as a field, I want to take advantage of the introduction to reflect on what these essays in fact do accomplish in disavowing the reigning historiography. To my mind, they not only go a long way toward explaining why it has been so difficult for criticism to acknowledge a field where there is plenty of fiction; they also help us imagine the possibilities of another kind of account that would include the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novel in American literary history. A careful reading of the essays will reveal the grounds on which each opposes the novels of the early republic and early national period to a historiography that presupposes the prior existence of a distinct, internally coherent national culture. While many authors expressed a desire for such a culture—Charles Brockden Brown and his literary cohort most famously—their call for a unified American culture strongly suggest that there was in fact no such thing. Instead, we must assume, there was another model for social relations. Let us consider what the field of the early American novel might look like were it to develop around this other model.

Suppose that we accept Davidson's invitation to see what would happen to the history of the novel when we take Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* as a fiction

[3] See Tennenhouse.

"based on fact" written by a man born in South Carolina and pair it with William Hill Brown's *Power of Sympathy*. Long considered the "first" American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* was published in 1789, the same year as the *Interesting Narrative*. To Davidson's observation that the American South would take on "a new role in the account of origins" (26) in a field constituted by these novels, I would bring Paul Gilroy's notion that a group's ability to maintain a semblance of autonomy and collective identity over time is based on its cultural practices, rather than its ability to trace its genealogy back to some point of origin. Instead of formulating a continuous tradition that aims at retrieving a lost past—an intellectual process he identifies with the "chronotope of the road"—Gilroy prefers to think within the "chronotope of the crossroads" (199).

The putative author of *The Interesting Narrative* crisscrosses the Atlantic world—in the manner of a picaro—from Africa, to the West Indies, to Virginia, England, Canada, and to the Mediterranean, and back again to the West Indies. What happens if we regard the key exchange that takes place in England when Equiano comes under the tutelage of the Guerin sisters as the prototype for William Hill Brown's narrative? This allows us to cast his protagonist, too, as a man at the crossroads. We can hardly say that Hill Brown's Worthy undergoes a conversion comparable to Equiano's in the small section of New England where most of *The Power of Sympathy* is staged. But the model of "the crossroads" can nevertheless direct us to a scene in a New England library, which operates as a site where similar exchanges occur. Here, characters representing quite different cultural perspectives engage in a debate on the consequences of novel reading. While the young and impressionable Miss Bourn thinks reading should be governed by local fashions in literature, the more traditional Mrs. Holmes and her father believe that reading ought to put one in conversation with the world. According to the old gentleman, a young woman who reads "methodically" and with "judgment" a variety of texts (including history, novels, and poetry) will be able "to form an estimate of the various topicks discussed in company, and to bear a part in all those conversations" (22). Any less rigorous course of reading will fail to give her what he calls "a true knowledge of the world" (23)—an important phrase in eighteenth-century British parlance (Solinger 54). At this point, Mrs. Holmes—a woman of sense—puts this question to Brown's protagonist, Worthy, who is a visitor to the family estate: Whence "arises this detestation of books in *some* of us females, and why are *they* enemies to any thing that may be called sentiment and conversation?" (28). In what may at first glance strike us as a condemnation of fiction, Worthy lays the blame on novels, which "are commonly confined to *dress*, *balls*, *visiting*, and the like *edifying* topicks; does it not follow," he asks, "that these must be the subjects of your conversation?" (29). But at this point, Brown abruptly departs from the conventional British attack on fiction for misleading the thoughts and feelings of impressionable young women. He insists that "*the female mind*," presumably like the male mind, "*is competent to any task*," provided it is properly cultivated (29). Herein lies the germ of an exchange whereby novels whose subject matter is not domestically confined can help to convert silly girls—and thus, by implication, all who learn to read with judgment—into citizens of the Atlantic world.

Once we factor the information that flows through print into the conversation taking place in a New England library, the exchange of views suddenly expands from a provincial gathering at a country estate into a cosmopolitan debate. If reading puts one in conversation with a diverse community whose membership need share only the faculties of sympathy and judgment, then the power of sympathy garnered from reading puts the reader imaginatively in the shoes of numerous others, affording her access to a much larger community.

If, as I have suggested, the early American novel asks its reader to position her or himself within a cluster of such intersections, then Benedict Anderson's model simply won't work. The novel according to Anderson encourages the reader to imagine his or her community as "a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous empty time, [which] is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation" (31). But *The Power of Sympathy*, *Wieland*, *Edgar Huntly*, *Secret History*, and *Logan* all refuse to yield anything like a single geographically bounded organism, its various parts moving simultaneously in time. Following characters as they travel from one city to another, these early American novels say little or nothing about the landscape they traverse, save for the forms of interruption it presents—hazards and digressions that force the narrative to go around an obstacle and pursue another route, often to a different location. Thus, instead of mapping the nation as a territory, these narratives produce nodal points where characters meet, change directions, take on certain features, and leave others behind. In such a world, it matters little where one comes from or goes to. More important is what a character brings to and takes away from an exchange. Farmer James, Edgar Huntly, Clara Wieland, and Mr. Worthy learn that such exchanges require one to bring something like a cultural literacy to the exchange before he or she can gain information from it. Every crossroad, town, or city is different, and generalizing from one place never entirely prepares one for the next; there is always new knowledge to acquire. In sharing the information he acquired in visits to Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and Charleston with his British correspondent, Crèvecoeur's Farmer James emphasizes what is unique to each place—whether it is the fact that the whalers of Martha's Vineyard do not engage in debauchery when they return from the sea, or that the women of Nantucket are responsible for overseeing the economic life of the island. To indicate what makes Charleston part of the slave-owning South, Farmer James describes the horrific scene of the slave left to die in a hanging cage. Similarly, the narrator of *Secret History* reveals that the real scandal of Saint Domingue is the amatory cruelty of the colonial elites more than the bloody business of slavery. Each place, in other words, has its own history. To unearth its history is to understand that place.

Brockden Brown's protagonists are known for undergoing a sequence of bad exchanges that finally reveal the secret history of the person whom they have mistakenly chosen to instruct, as Arthur Mervyn does with Welbeck, and Edgar Huntly, paradoxically, with himself. "The Secret History of Boston" could easily be an alternative title for *The Power of Sympathy*, which turns on the fact that the scion of one of that city's most prominent families fathered an illegitimate daughter with whom his only son has fallen in love. Harrington the younger

commits suicide on learning that his beloved Harriot is actually his half sister, and the family line is threatened with extinction. Through his successful courtship of Harrington's legitimate daughter, young Harrington's friend, aptly named Mr. Worthy, provides a suitable substitute. In exchange, the elder Harrington gives Worthy both the family's sole surviving daughter and the social prestige that makes Worthy's literacy equivalent to Myra's wealth and prominence. The community that comes into being through this exchange is not based on common origins or local customs but on the medium of exchange: a high degree of literacy.

Its sense of time also distinguishes the novel of the early republic from later nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels that come closer to fulfilling Anderson's model. In the early novel, time rarely moves "forward" in a manner that mirrors history, and when it does, it inevitably encounters a cause for digression. Clithero Edny bursts into Edgar Huntly's life and halts the progress of the narrative in order to provide an account of his own life in some detail from birth until the present moment—and his is just one of several narratives that similarly loop around and rejoin Huntly's. The interruption of chronological time is so frequent and prolonged in *Logan* that ever since the mid-nineteenth century readers have thrown up their hands in frustration and declared the novel either "excessive" or "incoherent." Like the geographical detours that set them off, these temporal loops bring together conflicting perspectives often on the same event, the point of which is not to determine "truth" but to exchange information. By circulating in and through what appears to be an arbitrary number of points of exchange, sometimes folding back, sometimes including loops within loops, the narrative links these points to form something like a network. This model of social relations is anything but the "arboreal" structure that presupposes a nation with its roots in the late-eighteenth century—a model that would allow us to identify the national tree in its beginnings. What we have instead is a network of exchanges capable of producing any number of surprising hybrids.

Such a network cannot be confined within one national boundary and is necessarily cosmopolitan in character. *Letters from an American Farmer* realizes a cosmopolitan vision by means of an epistolary framework that puts an American farmer in correspondence with a British gentleman. Sansay's *Secret History* escorts its reader through circuits of exchange between Philadelphia and Haiti, Haiti and France, back to Philadelphia, then to Haiti, and on to Cuba. *Logan* sends the reader off to London to learn about George of Salisbury, the *English*man who took on the name of Logan after marrying into the Mingo warrior's line. The narrator of Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* reports by novel's end that he is writing from Europe; Clara Wieland writes that she is living with her uncle in Montpellier; and *Ormond* ends as Constantia Dudley arrives in England. In every case, characters either gather information from places in Europe, the Caribbean, and the trans-Caucuses, or carry information to such locations after it has circulated in the United States.

It is telling that the single most popular gothic novel in nineteenth-century America, Isaac Mitchell's *The Asylum; or, Alonzo and Melissa* (1811)[4] contains a

[4] The first edition of this text was originally published serially in 1804.

gothic castle on the Long Island Sound. If we don't have to go to Europe to find a gothic castle, then we might well expect such a novel to locate its characters within the geographical boundaries of the nation. Such is not the case, however. The economic disparity between the lovers poses an obstacle that requires information from abroad. They are torn apart when Alonzo's father loses his fortune; it subsequently takes nothing less than the intervention of Benjamin Franklin, an old friend and business partner of his father, to recover the investment and restore the economic equity between the lovers' families, enabling Alonzo to marry Melissa. To meet Franklin, however, the narrative has to transport Alonzo to Paris. To get to Paris, Alonzo enlists in the Revolutionary army, is captured, sent to London in chains, and only after his escape from a British prison ship makes his way to the Continent. The early American novel assumes that citizens of the United States travel widely, that the boundaries of the new nation are extremely porous, and that its networks intersect or overlap with those of Western Europe.

To accept the fact that the early American novel imagined the new nation as a cluster of local sites of exchange, connected to form larger circuits of information and thus a network, forces one to reexamine some cherished notions about American literature. Exceptionalism comes first to mind. The prevailing arboreal figure of nation formation requires us to think of American literature as springing from an indigenous American root and developing within the geographical boundaries of the new United States. As Ezra Tawil explains, the very notion of exceptionalism comes from Europe. Brockden Brown, for one, staked his literary reputation on working with European conventions and adapting British philosophical issues to an American context. If even the model for our self-description came from elsewhere, then so did our culture. It is likely, I would add, that it still does. From this, it follows that crabgrass is a more accurate figure than a tree for representing the formation of American literature. Crabgrass, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, behaves rhizomatically (7). It has neither beginning nor end. It moves outward from several centers wherever there is soil and little resistance. Crabgrass absorbs whatever nourishment it finds in order to continue spreading. Especially important is the fact that crabgrass extends its leaves and shoots into new territory before (and not after) it puts down roots there. In this respect, the spread of crabgrass exactly reverses the growth of trees. To translate this figure into a literary-historical narrative, we must simply assume that culture spreads first from one place to another and, where it thrives, there puts down roots and adapts to the new location by taking on specific features of the place.

To this point, I have set something like the rhizome, or what I am calling a network, in opposition to the arboreal structure of literary-historical narratives as well as history itself. But in fact the two are, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, merely two different ways of looking at the same phenomenon: "There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots" (20). The one view is relatively abstract and screens out the detours and digressions by which a narrative "moves" toward its destination; the other can be described as "immanent" in that it focuses on the many exchanges that it takes to constitute a network (20). To tell the story of the American novel, I would argue, literary scholars select certain knots of arboresence (the realist or gothic traditions, for

example) and retrospectively construct an indigenous tradition where there is in fact a network of exchanges. It is no doubt for this reason that other scholars can come along and reclaim suppressed traditions—women's sentimental fiction and slave narratives, to mention two. To the degree that these lay claim to originality and difference rather than connection and exchange, however, they will fall into the trap of arboresence too.

If it is no longer possible to use indigeneity as the source of our literature's uniqueness, then how do we think about exceptionalism? Giorgio Agamben reminds us that despite appearances to the contrary, the exception is never outside the system of exchange; the exception is bound to the rule that it appears to break but in fact brings into being (81). This, I believe, offers a way of thinking about our literature comparable to what early American novelists saw as the condition for writing. In a system of exchange, how can one be inside and outside at the same time? By refusing to enter into an exchange, one actually enacts a form of exchange from which he departs with something missing—a lack or an absence—that shapes him as surely as any other additive. This is precisely the position that the historical Logan occupies in Elmer's analysis: "the individual that stands outside of history, outside the circuits of exchange and sympathy" (157). Pictured in a popular nineteenth-century magazine illustration at the foot of an elm where a peace treaty is to be signed, he "ostentatiously declines to participate in the peace" (157). But even in rejecting this exchange, the second Logan asserts the rule of English culture in order to define himself as the exception to it. Try as Neal might to imagine it, from the very beginning he can neither integrate the second Logan into the exchanges structuring the novel, nor give him an existence separate and apart from those exchanges. Indeed, we might read the entire novel as a constellation of self-negating exchanges for which incest is the paradigm.

I would like to suggest that the same principle holds true for American fiction: no author writing fiction in English from North America could write outside a transatlantic system of exchange, even if he or she wanted to do so. Indeed, more often than not, British novels of the period acknowledge the kind of network I have been elaborating as the condition of their production, including the novels of Defoe, Sterne, Richardson, or Fielding out of which Ian Watt abstracts the roots, trunk, and branches comprising his *Rise of the Novel*. As a result of this retroactive reconstruction, the cosmopolitan nature and diversity of the eighteenth-century British novel tend to drop from sight. I find it more than a little ironic that James Fenimore Cooper, one of the first American novelists to be considered our very own, wrote many of his novels while he was living in England, France, and Italy and reading the works of Sir Walter Scott. From this perspective, we might say, the early American novel is no exception after all.

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