



## Separatist Nationalism in Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants*

Karsten H. Piep

*Miami University, Oxford, Ohio*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

## Recommended Citation

Piep, Karsten H. "Separatist Nationalism in Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.4 (2004): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1247>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1247)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1156 times as of 11/07/19. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**CLCWeb Volume 6 Issue 4 (December 2004) Article 1**

**Karsten H. Piep,**

**"Separatist Nationalism in Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants*"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss4/1>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.4 (2004)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** Karsten H. Piep, in his paper "Separatist Nationalism in Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants*," argues that only recently rediscovered among American scholars and still awaiting much critical work, Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants* offers an intriguing case study in the complex relationship between fictional representation and late eighteenth-century nation formation. Tracing briefly the novel's reception history, Piep locates *The Emigrants* within the socio-political context of eighteenth-century discourses on revolution, emancipation, and independence. Taking Benedict Anderson's study on the rise of nationalism as a point of reference, Piep argues that Imlay's novel offers an example of a perhaps uniquely American separatist nationalism that proffers, employs, expands, and subverts "official" or dominant accounts of nationalism by inviting a transatlantic readership to imagine an utopian community in the remote Ohio River Valley. Piep also explores in his study how novelistic representations of Benedict Anderson's notion of "homogenous, empty time" can be applied with regard to transatlantic imaginings of alternative communities in Imlay's novel.

## Karsten H. PIEP

### Separatist Nationalism in Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants*

Among the earliest American novels written, Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants, &c., Or, The History of an Expatriated Family, Being A Delineation of English Manners, Drawn from Real Characters* was also among the latest to arrive in the New World. First published 1793 in London and reprinted the following year in Dublin, it was not until 1964 that a scholarly facsimile reprint of *The Emigrants* appeared in the U.S. Ironically, the American editor of this text, Robert R. Hare, ascribed the novel not to Imlay but "more probably" to Mary Wollstonecraft, whose posthumous *Letters to Imlay* had so severely damaged Imlay's reputation. It took two more decades before the scholarly community reconfirmed Imlay's authorship and yet another fourteen years before renewed interest in early American fiction eventually prompted the first U.S. edition of *The Emigrants* in 1998. The story of the book's belated journey is instructive. For as we shall see, being late and yet being ahead of time is a crucial experience shared by all the emigrants in Imlay's novel. But belatedness haunts Imlay's epistolary novel in other ways, too. Propagating an utopian community west of the Allegheny Mountains, founded on principles of Jacobin idealism, Wollstonecraftian feminism, Quesnarian physiocracy, and Jeffersonian agrarianism, *The Emigrants* appeared at a time when such radical notions were fast achieving notoriety. With the institution of the Reign of Terror under Robespierre, the French Revolution's call for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was droned out by the sound of the falling guillotine. In England as elsewhere in Europe and North America, conservatives seized the hour by associating liberalism with the most fanatic and violent events unfolding in France. Reform-minded authors such as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, Tom Paine, Helen Maria Williams, Jean-Pierre Brissot, and Joel Barlow, all of whom Imlay had met in Paris, suddenly became targets of the self-styled Anti-Jacobin press (see Seelye 204). Something had apparently gone terribly wrong and even the most radical Enlightenment thinkers began losing faith in the perfectibility of humankind. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, who, in part inspired by Imlay's glowing *A Topographical Description of North America* (1792), had seriously considered founding a pantisocratic commune in Pennsylvania or Kentucky, ultimately abandoned their plans (Andrews 36). "I am sick of the world," a disheartened Southey wrote upon tidings of Jean-Pierre Brissot's execution, "and discontented with everyone in it" (194).

Similar doubts concerning the "perfectibility of society" are also echoed in *The Emigrants*, when Sir T. Morley, a London barrister, cautions P.P: "I am afraid that the philosophers of the present day, by aiming at too much, will produce evils equivalent to those they have laboured to remove" (251). Of course, such qualms are quickly brushed aside in Imlay's idealistic novel when P.P relates that his formerly debauched and effeminate nephew, George, through hard physical labor under the cleansing Ohio sun, "now has more the appearance of an Ancient Briton" (256). "Human perfectibility," George's example shows is *still* possible; not through "idle speculation," but through "a new creation bursting from the shades of wilderness into a populous state" (47). Since the revolutionary impulse in the United States, France, and Britain had given way to reactionism, the American West emerges as "the country where the foundation must be laid for the renovation of those privileges, which have decayed under the influence of the most capricious and violent despotism" (48). Even so, the London critics remained apparently unconvinced by George's sudden transformation in the 'Wild West.' Amidst the general liberal disillusionment as well as the growing reactionary backlash, Imlay's idealistic *The Emigrants* -- unlike his *A Topographical Description of North America* -- received mostly bad reviews. Only the critic for *Monthly Review*, a staunch Whig publication, praised Imlay as "an enlightened philosopher" who compares the "the rigour of matrimonial institutions" to "a state of oppressive vassalage" and argues "that it would greatly increase the happiness of society, if divorces could be more easily obtained" (158). Interestingly enough, the favorable critic did not comment upon Imlay's scheme of establishing a physiocratic utopia in the backlands of the Ohio River Valley. New, idealistic models of government, it seems, had entirely come out of fashion. Although *The Emigrants* followed Robert Tyler's immensely popular play *The Contrast* (1787) in valorizing the forthright American character vis-à-vis the depraved sophis-

try of the European mind, the novel did not, as mentioned above, make it across the Atlantic. The reasons for this might have been manifold, ranging from problems of printing and distribution to general fears that the new, often sensationalistic genre of the novel might seduce the common reader into lewd and subversive behavior (Davidson 13). As W.M. Verhoeven and Amanda Gilroy point out, "the sentimental novel, and especially the epistolary novel?came to be seen especially in conservative circles as supporting a trend toward dangerous, individual excess at a time when national consensus was thought to be paramount" (xv). Given Imlay's stern rejection of conventional morality and his thinly veiled separatist notions in *The Emigrants*, one might hence presume that American publishers quietly opted not to intensify the raging controversy between Federalists and Anti-Federalists that threatened the very fabric of the young republic and in 1798 led to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Act. Tainted by his scandalous affair with Mary Wollstonecraft that had resulted in an "illegitimate" daughter, Imlay -- together with his novel, his dubious land selling schemes, and his radical utopian ideas -- quietly disappeared from the pages of history in 1796. He apparently died around 1828 on the Isle of Jersey, where a headstone epitaph remembers Imlay as a "stranger intelligent" who furthered "the social advances of the day" (Durant 246).

At the turn of the twentieth century, once briefly considered for the dubious distinction of being the first American novel, *The Emigrants* still awaits thorough critical evaluation. So far, a mere handful of modern critics have offered short interpretations of Imlay's novel, most of which attempt to classify it either as a sentimental novel, as a picturesque novel, or as a novel of ideas. Cathy N. Davidson, for example, devotes a few words to *The Emigrants* in her *Revolution and the Word* under the rubric "sentimental novel." Reading it through a feminist lens, she assesses that Imlay ultimately fails "to envision female freedoms beyond sexual freedom" so that "his female characters" are nothing more than "Rousseauistically passive helpmates" (131). John Seelye, by contrast, stresses the picturesque aspects of *The Emigrant*, seeing it as "a thoroughly Jacobinized fiction" whose pastoral "topography" asserts "the contiguity of the separatist, the secessionist, and the utopian impulses" (160). In a similar vein, W.M. Verhoeven and Amanda Gilroy write, "*The Emigrants* makes a claim for consideration as a Jacobin novel -- a document of the transatlantic revolutionary movement." But Verhoeven and Gilroy further note that "there are contradictions in the revolutionary rhetoric of personal liberty that support *The Emigrant's* valorization of America over England (or Europe), and women continue to be seen as possession or spectacle" (x). Lastly, foregrounding eighteenth-century "class anxieties," Julie Ellison reads *The Emigrants* -- along with Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769, written in Canada) and Charlotte Lennox's *Euphemia* (1790) -- as a "transatlantic novel" wherein "the new world is constructed both as an economic sanctuary and as a penitential trial of material discipline" (322). But rather than erasing social classes, Ellison concludes, "Imlay develops the ideal of the gentlemanly officer veteran, who survives his romantic melancholia to become a hard-working civic activist" (322).

Limited as it may be, the critical reception of *The Emigrants* has provided valuable insights with respect to the work's internal contradictions. Despite its demand for radical social reforms, the novel tends to reinscribe traditional gender roles and class hierarchies. "Rescued" by chivalric men from "barbarian slavery" in England as well as "the [Native-American] savages," the women in Imlay's ideal state, solely preoccupied with fostering "domestic bliss" in the backwoods, remain excluded from self-government (241, 216). Likewise, access to education is restricted for females in Imlay's utopia, as P.P. -- makes clear to Caroline: "I will say nothing of the education of girls, for the amendment of the one, would naturally lend amelioration of the other" (107). Similarly, the common male settlers "who served in the late war" are at the mercy of the benevolent stewardship of General W-, Captain Arl-ton, and the Honorable P.P-, who "teach them appropriate knowledge" pertaining to "agriculture ... all useful arts," and "the science of government and jurisprudence" (247, 233). And despite the novel's indictment against "the system of slavery" as well as its fairly sympathetic depiction of Indians (a band of which is briefly shown as "going to Pittsburgh for the purpose of burying the hatchet, that white people and Indians might live together like brothers"), there is no place for racial or cultural diversity in Imlay's ideal community (61, 49). As Caroline's states after her "rescue from the savages," Bellefont is a "select society" of gallant Anglo-American males and their wives (247). In the end, Imlay's patriarchal and patronizing "model

of society" does not look all that different from that of the Founding Fathers, for active political participation remains circumscribed by gender, class, and race. Despite these obvious shortcomings, however, the novel's "revolutionary rhetoric" as well as the "separatist" and "transatlantic" qualities of Imlay's imagined community deserve closer scrutiny. Since the novel commences *after* the Revolution had already officially ended in America (and was written as the Revolution began to devour its own children in France), Imlay's rhetoric might perhaps be best understood as *post-revolutionary*, centered on imagining the contour, shape, and character of a new community that was to emerge out of the actual revolution. It is precisely here that the dual experience of being late and, simultaneously, being ahead of time assumes significance. For although the novel's emigrants arrive only after the United States had already, as it were, imagined itself into being (literally by drafting the constitution in Philadelphia), the latecomers, nevertheless, re-imagine their "own little society" on the cutting-edge of the "old" nation. Coming late thus enables the emigrants to be first in imagining the "newest," most "progressive" society on the unexplored margins of the American nation. This imagining of an alternative community that is at the same time *within* and *without* the boundaries of America introduces what Homi K. Bhabha has called "a temporality of the in-between" (299). As much nation-builders as colonists, Imlay's emigrant pioneers create a spatio-temporal reality for themselves that somehow transcends the geographical, economical, and political confines of nascent creole nationalism.

Notably, in Imlay's novel the "American empire" is not so much a "self-contained" "administrative unit," as an ever-expanding playground for societal experimentation (or a the site of popular counter-nationalism) that broadens, redefines, multiplies, undermines "the affective bonds of [U.S.] nationalism" promoted by "pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen" (Anderson 52-53, 64). Advertising the American West to prospective settlers in England and the American East Coast as a new home "where there is room for millions" and where "material abundance" brings about "enlightened government," *The Emigrants* thus presents an early example of a form of *separatist nationalism*, which is at once a *product of* and a *challenge to* the imagined "deep, horizontal comradeship" among large numbers of individuals (*The Emigrants* 43; Anderson 6). While fostering the development of a "national consciousness," Imlay's utopian novel exposes and exploits the contradictions that marked emergent nation-states by inviting its transatlantic readership to imagine an ideal America (which, to be sure, is plagued by its own set of ambiguities). Rather than conjuring up images of a cohesive, solid, homogenous America, *The Emigrants* points to what Davidson has aptly termed "the ambiguous and multivalent nation," wherein different notions of what it means to be American clash with each other (42). Imlay's separatist fiction highlights that the new genre of the novel was involved in both the *construction* and *deconstruction* or *particularization* of unifying concepts of nationhood and citizenship. As Davidson notes: "The emergence of the novel was part of a movement in the late eighteenth century toward a re-assessment of the role of the 'average' American and a concomitant questioning of political, ministerial, legal, and even medical authorities on the part of the citizens of the new nation who, having already accepted the egalitarian rhetoric of the Revolution, increasingly believed that the Republic belonged as much to them as to the gentry" (44). Significantly, even Anderson, who strongly emphasizes the novel's role in producing the fiction of "a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history," observes that U.S. nationalism was "elastic enough, combined with the rapid expansion of the western frontier and the contradictions generated between the economies of the North and the South, to precipitate a war of secession *almost a century after the Declaration of Independence*" (26, 64). Not merely foreseeing but actively promoting "the rapid expansion of the western frontier," *The Emigrants* pervasive "questioning of political, ministerial, legal ... authorities" on behalf of discontented U.S. citizens and emigrants alike, culminates in an *imagined separatist community of transatlantic dissidents*. The anticipated influx of dislocated European and American settlers into the western frontier provides the impulse "to form in epitome the model of society" with the necessary momentum. Moreover, the desire to set up a new community rather than joining the United States proper, is amplified by the pioneers impressions of "the unnatural customs of the European world" that are casting long shadows across the Atlantic (219). Acutely "aware of the tyranny of governments," Imlay's "manly" settlers in the "wilderness" consider

Philadelphia nearly as corrupted as London (221). "The Allegany is not so broad as the Monongahela," Caroline writes from Pittsburgh to her sister in London, "but its current is much more impetuous, and from the fierceness of its aspect ... it appears to be what it really is, the line between civilization and barbarism (53). A latecomer and outsider, Caroline sees the United States for "what it is really is: "a newly independent nation state that has already reverted back to "barbarism" of the "Old World." For like in England, "pecuniary distress" and "inconsistency of the law of matrimony," we learn from Miss R-'s letter to Mrs. W-, are but two "of the many instances of misery" people in the Eastern states have to endure (19).

In the unspoiled Western regions, on the other hand, "we find all the cheerful idleness that plenty gives" and "the plantations" there "are cultivated to such perfection, that" they are "scarcely equaled in any part of America" (205). Not surprisingly, even the well-to-do General W- and his wife, who were "the admiration of the gay circles of Philadelphia," recognize "the dissipation which the English and French manners had introduced during the last war" and come "to a resolution of retiring to this country" (55). Obviously, the site of both economic and societal progress has shifted to the West after the War of Independence, where it is the task of both transnational and transatlantic wanderers to enact the revolutionary promise of "freedom from bondage" without further reference to the cultural and administrative centers to the East (204). In light of Imlay's geopolitical vision, it appears advisable to go beyond the bounds of the picturesque, the sentimental, or the Jacobin novel and to situate *The Emigrants* within the wider discourses of nationalism that, according to Benedict Anderson, emerged in the "creole states" of the Americas in the late eighteenth century (64). Recourse to Anderson seems particularly fruitful here, for at least half of the novel's characters are not native-born creoles and yet, like millions of other emigrants that were to come to American shores, imagine themselves *into* the *existing* geopolitical landscape, thereby altering its shape, size, composition, tradition, character, self-conception, etc. As Bhabha has shown with regard to "the later phase of modern nations," "gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers" complicate Anderson's concept of "homogeneous, empty time" by foregrounding "the internal contradictions of the modern liberal nation," struggling to accommodate multivalent notions, imaginings, and discourses of nation-ness (291-95). Put simply, in the very process of severing bonds with England, Imlay's emigrants construct their own version of what it means to be American, which is at odds with the official nationalistic discourse. Bhabha has called this "the contestation of narrative authority between the pedagogical and the performative" (299). Perhaps nowhere in Imlay's novel does this contest between *prescribed* or "official" nationalism and *practiced* or "popular" nationalism become more apparent as when the arguments for both marital divorce and separatist communalism are derived from the revolutionary language of the Declaration of Independence (see Anderson 83). Furthermore, even the novel's creoles, who are for the most part, like Imlay himself, veterans of the War of Independence, seem to view themselves as emigrants to an unfamiliar land, where they not only stake out geographical space for an imagined community that differs significantly from the established communities to the east, but also engage in imperialist expansionism on behalf of an elusive "American empire" that allows for the coexistence of different "model[s] of society" (233). Perceiving that "the ruthless hand of barbarous war has in many places desolated the fairest country upon the face of the globe," the disenchanting war veteran Arlton finds renewed hope in "the western territory of this continent, as its infancy affords an opportunity to its citizens of establishing a system comfortable to reason and humanity, and thereby extend the blessing of civilization to all orders of men" (233). Again, the economic, political, and cultural points of reference are decentered in Imlay's novel: since urban centers such as Boston and Philadelphia have become implicated in "a system pregnant with evils the most monstrous," Arlton posits Bellefont "in the middle provinces of America" as the new core of a truly democratic civilization, around which "small societies of this kind" will some day form "a great community" (233-35). Contrary to Anderson's account, then, separatism, nationalism, and imperialism are not mutually exclusive, but seem to operate as reciprocal concepts in Imlay's picturesque, sentimental novel of ideas. While grounding its existence in the physical and political separation from both the "old" colonial and the "new" postcolonial centers to the east (i.e., London and Philadelphia respec-

tively), Imlay's imagined community "in the middle provinces" appears to serve as a catalyst for opening-up the rest of the vast North American continent to "all unfortunate people ... of rational character" (55).

What *The Emigrants* brings into view, then, is an economically and/or politically motivated *separatist communalism* or *separatist nationalism* that a) has a strong transatlantic appeal, b) exploits contradictions within the "official" discourses of established nations, and c) posits its own civic or cultural centers on the seemingly unoccupied margins of existing societies or nations (incidentally, the national and transatlantic Mormon migration to Utah, albeit religiously motivated, seems to bespeak a similar kind of *separatist communalism* or *separatist nationalism*). In Anderson's account of the emergence of modern nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century, the novel, alongside the newspaper, plays a decisive role. As the medieval fatalism of the "religious modes" gradually gave way to the "rationalist secularism" of the Enlightenment, Anderson observes, it was not the "coalition between Protestantism and print-capitalism" *per se*, but the innovative narrative techniques of "the novel and the newspaper" that laid the conceptual groundwork for the "transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning," signified by the invention of nation-states (11, 25, 40). "For these forms provided the technical means for 'representing' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (25). The internal structure of the novel, which feigns *omnipresence* and portrays action as unfolding *simultaneously* at different locations, Anderson argues, both begets notions of anonymous human coexistence in "homogenous, empty time" and enables the *individual* reader to *imagine* him- or herself as part of a much larger *community* of fellow-readers (25-26). This "idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time," Anderson deduces, "is the precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (26).

The altogether seventy-three, chronologically arranged letters which constitute *The Emigrants* certainly evoke what Anderson calls "homogenous, empty time" in that they present various inter-related plots and subplots, unfolding simultaneously in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Louisville, Lexington, Bristol, and London. Yet, as the preceding list of settings already indicates, the readers' experience of "homogenous, empty time" extends beyond the United States of 1793, encompassing the western territories as well as England. Directed principally at a British audience, who for the most part was presumably rather unfamiliar with American geography, Imlay's novel does not only seem to "homogenize" national time, but international time as well. Although English readers may never have encountered Americans, nor traveled abroad, the novel (much like travelogues or international reports in the newspaper) enables them to visualize anonymous human coexistence on a transatlantic scale. The very idea of not just *one* but *many*, *coexisting* communities, then, allows readers to either project themselves into another, already existing society (such as the United States) or to picture themselves as part of an altogether new, embryonic society. In short, the transatlantic novel gives form and concrete shape to slumbering desires for a better future elsewhere. Thus, instead of imagined familiarity, imagined newness constitutes the lure of Imlay's separatist community: "Here," Caroline writes from Pittsburgh to London, "is a continual feast for the imagination -- here every thing is new" (53). Unlike in the nationalistic novels Anderson cites, personal pronouns such as "we" or "our" do not invoke shared landscapes or customs, but, quite to the contrary, function as invitations to vicariously partake in the letter-writers novel and liberating experiences of beautiful sights, fertile soils, material abundance, honest courtship, communal living, etc. Consequently, the letters from the "land of freedom and love" woo a foreign audience with lustrous and elaborate descriptions of the Ohio River Valley's superior physical, economic and social aspects (248): "The Ohio has been celebrated by geographers for its beauty, and its country for fertility, but this delightful spot has a combination of charms, that renders it altogether enchanting. ... This body of land, Arl-ton has parceled out into a number of lots, which are in part settled, and the remainder are settling, he having reserved six for himself and those friends who may in the future wish to join us. Nearly in the center of one of these lots, is a fountain, I have called *Bellefont*, from whence the name of our seat is taken. ? These are not our only pleasures, for we have a great number of neighbours, independent of our select society, who are sensible and intelligent, and possess all the social virtues in an eminent degree; so that our amusements have all

the variety that a rational being can wish. Indeed we seldom dine alone, or at home; for such is the hospitality of the country, and the plenty which every where prevails, that there is no such thing as want" (247-48).

"Our little society here," invoked repeatedly in Mrs. W-'s and Caroline's letters to Massachusetts and England respectively, is hence represented as the paradisiacal refuge for "subjugated" females, "unfortunate debtors," and other "victims of arbitrary power" everywhere (218-20). "Fly then my beloved R- to this place," Mrs. W- appeals from Pittsburgh, "and let me clasp you to my arms, and soothe you to a forgetfulness of all past miseries. -- Come and add one to our little society, who all wish for the addition of you to make their circle compleat" (43). As Mrs. W-'s invitation indicates, perceived allegiances, commitments, and duties to old communities (including marriage as it mirrors society at large) must be forgotten in the process of forming a new, improved community. For Lady B-, this becomes a slow and painful lesson. Her decadent husband treats her as "a domestic machine," but she nonetheless feels "bound to [her] Lord by the ties of matrimony, which it is not possible to dissolve" (92). Only the sudden death of the aristocratic oppressor enables her to engage in a mutually satisfying relationship with P.P- (93). To encourage, justify, and legitimize breaches of loyalty under insufferable circumstances, the "miseries" of the 'here and now' must therefore be sharply contrasted with the joys of the 'yet to come.' Thus, whereas the nationalistic novels cited by Anderson delineate their "'interior' time" with the "'exterior' time of the reader's everyday life," Imlay's utopian novel beckons with the prospect of a sanguine future that diverges from the "'exterior time of the reader's everyday life" (26). "The weak have been continually oppressed by the caprice or tyranny of inhuman institutions," P.P- assesses, only to point toward a dawning future when "laws are made more conformable to the principles of morality, and the unalienable privileges of our nature" (105). Keenly aware, however, that the "tyranny of inhuman intuitions" disfigures the "habits of daily life," P.P- ultimately advocates removal to "Bellefont" -- the spatially and temporally distant locus of the novel's collective "we" -- where a recovery of the "the unalienable privileges of our nature" becomes possible *precisely* because the utopian community *transcends* the "exterior time of the reader's everyday life" (105-6). Contrary to novels such as José Rizal's *Noli Me Tangre* (1887), which Anderson quotes to illustrate the creation of an imaginary community of Filipino readers that is seemingly *devoid* of internal conflicts (27-28), Imlay's *The Emigrants* conjures up a fictional community of Anglo-American nonconformists that both *exposes* and seemingly *resolves* the conflicts within previously imagined communities (e.g., the United States and England).

Similar to many sentimental novels of the late eighteenth century such as William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) and Susan Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, *The Emigrants* attacks existing marriage laws that de facto rendered wives the property of their husbands and advocates female education, albeit in a male-mediated fashion. But unlike the typical sentimental novel of manners, *The Emigrants* frames the issue of "domestic bondage" in terms of the larger political question of self-determination. Drawing at once upon the popular modes of the sentimental and the picturesque novel, *The Emigrants* explicitly ties arguments for marital divorce to the inalienable right of political and economic autonomy, eloquently propounded in the Declaration of Independence. Eliza's torturous marriage to the dissipated Mr. F- presents without doubt Imlay's harshest critique of the economic and sexual exploitation of women. Having indulged in various financial and extramarital "extravagances," Mr. F- eventually finds himself financially and morally "impotent" (239). Pursued by creditors, the egocentric Mr. F-, like "many honourable gentlemen" before him, proposes his wife "the prostitution of her own person" (238). In the eyes of the Bellefontians, such "horrific conduct" calls for the immediate termination of all social ties, especially since it is sanctioned by the state. Reminding the reader that under "current law" women "are considered in the light of property," an outraged Arl-ton levels a strong indictment against this English "school of corruption, where the prostitution of principle and the feelings loose their elegant elasticity" (252). "Will it ever be believed by posterity," Arl-ton, ever mindful of his own historical mission, asks rhetorically, "that in a country renowned for gallantry and honour, and which has given the most glorious proofs of its attachment to freedom ... they should have been insensible spectators of the most inhuman and nefarious oppression that ever disgraced the annals of humanity" (252)?



Hinting an imminent third revolution (i.e., the French Revolution) which will follow the "glorious revolution" of 1688 and the "revolt" of the American people, the novel suggests that hopes for peaceful reform are slim, thereby supplying another reason for a speedy removal to "untarnished western lands" (253). Hence, echoing Mrs. W-'s letter to Mrs. R- in Massachusetts, who too had been pressured into a fiscal marriage, Caroline beseeches her "poor" sister in London: "fly immediately from bondage to a land of freedom and love; and here in the bosom of peaceful affection, let the effusions of our hearts drown in oblivion the recollection of former distress" (258).

Appropriately, the basis for Imlay's physiocratic Ohio Valley community, where *true* love begets *true* freedom and vice versa, lies in the congenial marriages between two "manly" American war veterans and two "charming" Englishwomen that stand in stark contrast to the debased arrangements of matrimony in the supposedly civilized centres to the east. In many ways, then, the small, self-governing farm community Imlay imagines on the wild banks of the Ohio River, may be seen as an anti-federalist endeavor to realize the unfulfilled promises of past revolutions both in England and America. As Jay Fliegelman has observed in his study on the ideological connections between the (unsuccessful) struggle for easier divorce laws and the colonies' separation from Great Britain, "the point of the Revolution would not be simply to dissolve an intolerable union but to establish a more glorious one founded on the most primary of social unions -- the voluntary marriage contract" (127). Juxtaposing buoyant news from the western territories and increasingly gloomy reports from America's East Coast as well as England, Imlay's novel not merely highlights the legal, economic, and political ills that mark the very communities to which its target audience belongs, but furthermore catalogues specific grounds for dissolving implied contractual relationships between individuals and a given state, government, nation, sovereign. If nationalistic novels, as Anderson asserts, "give[] a hypnotic conformation of the solidity of a community," Imlay's separatist novel seems to give a repetitive confirmation of the tenuousness of communities that violate social contracts (27). "Compare the happiness of the people who are forming an empire in this remote part of the world, with the vanity and distractions which the depravity of the European manners have made general on your side of the water," P.P- bids Sir Thomas Mor-ley, acting as a stand-in for all discontented Englishmen and -- women (212). Obviously, like General W-, Mrs. R-, Captain Arl-ton, Mrs. W-, Eliza, Caroline, P.P-, etc., the reader is expected to draw the apposite conclusion and to liberate him- or herself from oppressive, non-reciprocal social arrangements. To be sure, as in Anderson's examples of "homogenous, empty time," all of the novel's characters "move calendrically" through the same *clock time*. Yet, the novel's simultaneous representation of "happiness" in the west and "depravity" in the east not only preserves what Walter Benjamin has called the "weak Messianic promise" of historical progress ("a storm blowing from paradise"), but also strives to give it substance, to make it concrete, tangible, realizable (156). Inspired by Rousseau's writings, Imlay's novel thus offers the uncivilized American West as the ideal location for establishing "a new mode of [European] civilization" that *reconciles* humankind *back* to nature by way of a *forward looking* social contract. Moreover, although *religious* sentiments are replaced by *romantic* sentiments, in representing the past (Europe, the American East Coast) and the future (the American West) as existing side-by-side, Imlay's novel opens up the porthole of emigration through which its readership may escape momentarily "homogenous, empty time."

#### Works Cited

- Andrews, Stuart. "Fellow Pantisocrats: Brissot, Cooper, and Imlay." *Symbiosis* 1.1 (1997): 34-47.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Benedict, Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. New York: Verso, 1999.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1989.
- Davidson, Cathy. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Ellison, Julie. "There and Back: Transatlantic Novels and Anglo-American Careers." *The Past as Prologue: Essays to Celebrate the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of ASECS*. Ed. Carla H. Hay and Sydney M. Conger. New York: AMS, 1995. 303-23.
- Fliegelman, Jay. *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.

Hare, Robert R. Introduction to *The Emigrants (1793) / Traditionally Ascribed to Gilbert Imlay, But, More Probably, By Mary Wollstonecraft*. 1793. 2nd edition 1794. Reprint. Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1964.

Imlay, Gilbert. *The Emigrants*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Imlay, Gilbert. *A Topographical Description of the Western Territories of North America* (1792). 3rd, expanded ed. Reprint. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968.

Seelye, John. "The Jacobin Mode in Early American Fiction: Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants*." *Early American Literature* 22 (1987): 204-12.

Seelye, John. *Beautiful Machine: Rivers and the Republican Plan, 1755-1825*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Verhoeven, W.M., and Amanda Gilroy. "Introduction." *The Emigrants*. Gilbert Imlay. New York: Penguin, 1998. ix-xlix.

Author's profile: Karsten H. Piep teaches English literature at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he is completing his PhD dissertation on the politics of class, gender, and race in US-American World War I prose. Piep's work has appeared in *Erfurt Electronic Studies in English* 9 (2003) and is forthcoming in *War, Literature & the Arts* (2005). Although at present focusing on early twentieth-century American literature, Piep's inquiries into the sociopolitical dynamics of literary production cross periodical as well as national boundaries. Three of his earlier articles on the Reconstruction politics of Lydia Maria Child and Washington Cable, the domestic politics of Frank Norris, and the Restoration politics of the popular press in sixteenth-century England have appeared in *Studies in American Fiction* (2003), *Papers on Language and Literature* (2004), and *Comitatus* (2004). E-mail: <[piepkh@muohio.edu](mailto:piepkh@muohio.edu)>.