

OUR SOUTH

*Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of
National Literature*

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ch. 1

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It is the sentence in parentheses that gets me. In it, Said wishes for a revelation that never happened; but at the same time he seems so unsure of what that revelation would have entailed that he must simply bracket the missed possibility and move on. What is the clarifying insight into British imperialism that Williams's "Welsh experience" should have afforded him?

In the course of writing *Our South*, I have become aware of authors who seem, despite the times in which they lived, to have been able to gain a critical vantage on the dominant modes of geographic fantasy in the national literature of their day. Grimké, Poe, Douglass, Delany, Jacobs, Cable, Cooper: for want of a better term, I have called their interventions a "southern critique" of U.S. nationalism, though their writing is most certainly not pro-"South," and though not all of them would have self-identified as "southerners." What they share, though, is a radically different vision of national identity. They dispense with the endless self-exoneration of U.S. nationalism; they understand the United States as not only the aspirational republic but also a site and source of sin and guilt and pain. They nurture a deep and abiding suspicion of claims to American transcendence or universality; and they bear hostility toward the general-confidence of U.S. writers that Americans not only know the nation's others fully, but also know what is best for them. One might discern across the chapters that follow the suggestion of an alternative tradition in U.S. letters, an oppositional, critical tradition at variance with the ones that we know as either national or "southern." This, above all, is a tradition we would do well to investigate farther.

Nationalization / The Plantation South

But if [the Americans] at once ceased to have negroes for slaves, and kings who live at a distance from them for masters, they, perhaps, would become the most astonishing people that ever appeared on the earth.

—Abbé Guillaume-Thomas-François Raynal, *Political and Philosophical History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (1770)

[W]ith the exception of the slave holding states, as we have no nobility but from worth, so we have no villainy but from misdeed. We have neither lord nor peasant, except in the South, where the planter partakes of European nobility, and the African slave of European peasantry.

—William Duniap, *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown* (1815)

The Problem of the Plantation

Were I to be possessed of a plantation, and my slaves treated in general as they are here, never could I rest in peace.

—J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)

THE UBIQUITOUS AMERICAN FARMER of early U.S. nationalism was produced by *writing over* the American planter, that venerable icon of English New World colonization. Thomas Jefferson comes immediately to mind, penning his paean to “the mass of cultivators” from Poplar Forest, his country retreat, in the late days of the war for independence: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” It perhaps goes without saying that the enslaved people of African descent who labored in the earth nearest him were not Jefferson’s subject in this famous passage. Instead, he invoked the yeoman farmer so privileged in Enlightenment thought as the foundational citizen of a republic: a figure “looking up to heaven, to [his] own soil and industry . . . for [his] subsistence.” This figure of the “husbandman”—independent by definition—was antithetical to both the enslaved agricultural laborer and his planter master, operating as they did in a relationship of abjection and domination. Yet as Jefferson extolled the act of cultivating the soil of Virginia itself as “the focus in which [God] keeps alive that sacred fire [of virtue],”¹ he have avoided raising the specter of the plantation in the minds of his contemporary readers? The subsistence farming of the yeoman was hardly the agricultural enterprise for which the British New World colonies, Virginia central among them, were famed and prized. Nor was it the primary mode of economic production that funded the bid for independence by the mainland colonists.²

Jefferson’s succinct apotheosis of the republican farmer has proved generative for more than two centuries of national thought in the United States.³ The construction of the American farmer with arguably the

greatest lasting influence on *literature*, however, was penned by no founding father, but by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur—who, although it is not so readily apparent, effected a similar renovation of American planter into American farmer at the cusp of U.S. nationalization. Crèvecoeur's biography would seem to disqualify him as an early nationalist:

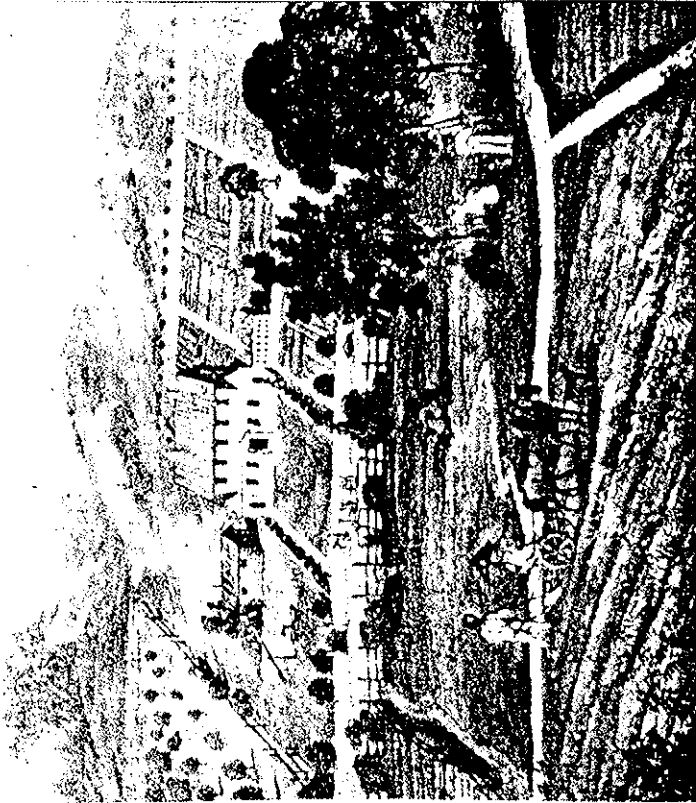


Figure 2. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's painting of his "Plantation of Pine Hill," ca. 1773–1775 (detail). Courtesy of the Yale University Library.

he first came to America as a young officer in the French army during the French and Indian War; became a naturalized British subject and prosperous planter in the colonies of New York and New Jersey by 1770; fled to Britain as a staunch loyalist in 1779; and ended his life as a repatriated Frenchman and Enlightenment philosophe. After his Tory leanings induced him to abandon his young American family and his adopted home for the capitals of Europe, he published his *Letters from an American Farmer* in London in 1782.⁴ In that year, when the independence of the rebelling North American colonies had become a foregone conclusion, but a treaty formalizing that independence had not yet been negotiated, Crèvecoeur assembled his book specifically for a British metropolitan audience curious about the "situations, manners, and customs" of the colonialists who lately had cost the mother country such trouble.⁵ He culled the twelve "letters" from thirty-seven sketches in English, mostly on American topics, that he had written over the previous decade; and he crafted an epistolary framing device to connect the sketches as communications from a quasi-autobiographical narrator, Farmer James of Pennsylvania, to an ostensible correspondent in London.⁶

Crèvecoeur's organizing aim in the *Letters* was to explain American nationalization to the citizens of Europe, a task that he famously posed as a rhetorical question: "What then is the American, this new man?" Enlightenment thinkers, at least since Rousseau's *Social Contract* of 1762, increasingly had seen legitimate states as expressions of distinct "peoples"; with his central question, Crèvecoeur posed the new political independence of the American states as deriving directly from a new popular personality, a novel collective way of life.⁷ His nationalist argument thus proceeded as a literary act: through his characterization of Farmer James, Crèvecoeur demonstrated that the daily lives of the rebelling American colonialists had irrevocably severed them from their old identity as British subjects, so much so that his narrator now had the task of explaining "this new man" to "the home English." At his most optimistic, particularly in the first three letters of the book, Crèvecoeur located the newness of the nationalizing American farmer precisely in his perfected yeoman stature, his attainment of an agrarian ideal previously unachieved in Western culture. That this foundational formulation of U.S. national distinctiveness based in republican virtue remains familiar today is thanks in no small part to the great influence of Crèvecoeur's book. Translated quickly into Dutch and German and expanded and rewritten by the author in the French editions of 1784 and 1787, *Letters*

from an *American Farmer* served as a dominant source for European conceptions of the United States well into the nineteenth century. Continued British and French regard for the book no doubt helped to secure its central place in the canon of early U.S. literature as it was assembled in the first decades of the twentieth century, and even today "Letter III," in particular, regularly appears as the first entry in anthologies of U.S. literature.⁸

That Crèvecoeur's "new man" belongs to the realm of fiction is a fact thrown into relief by his slightly earlier representation of American life in a watercolor titled "Plantation of Pine-Hill" (reproduced at the opening of this chapter). Painted sometime between 1773 and 1775, just before the colonial war for independence, Crèvecoeur's watercolor reveals that his characterization of Farmer James in 1782 required a radical revision of the terms with which he had described the American situation less than a decade before.⁹ Like his *Letters*, Crèvecoeur's painting was produced to portray life in the *New World* for a European audience, but in it he depicted himself not as a yeoman farmer but, unmistakably, as an English colonial planter, a figure that had existed and evolved in Anglo-American culture over the previous two hundred years. From the late sixteenth century forward, English colonists had "referred to their own activities in occupying the *New World* as planting the garden": they had understood their building of houses, enclosing of land with fences, and plowing (or "subduing") the American soil as specifically English rituals of possession, in harmony with English common law and biblical interpretation.¹⁰ Crèvecoeur drew upon these venerable conventions for portraying mastery over American land, framing the illustration of his Hudson Valley "plantation" with a backdrop of rolling hills disciplined into fenced cultivation. He organized the scene around two central figures counterpoised in an allegory of English *New World* agricultural enterprise: a white, two-story planter's dwelling, embellished with wings and portico, hovering above a lone black man at work at his plow in the foreground.¹¹

Colonization by plantation had been valorized in British thought specifically in opposition to the forms of Spanish *New World* colonization, which were anathematized as extracting wealth from American soil via gold mining rather than improving it through cultivation.¹² Crèvecoeur's British partisan interest in precisely this ideological use of the plantation appeared in his pre-Revolutionary "Sketch of a Contrast between the Spanish & English Colonies," written at around the same time that he produced his painting. After schematically comparing Pennsylvania with Peru, he concluded

that there is a Necessary Purity of Manners arising from a close application to Rural Improvements; debauched hands, Polluted with Crimes covered with the Filth of Idleness, cannot make the Earth To Team with Yellow Harvest . . . if a society follow that salutary Maxim & Live altogether by Tilling, if they are a people of cultivators, & the other society do not, it is an Easy Task to ascertain, which of the Two people possesses the Least contaminated Manners.¹³

Prior to independence, Crèvecoeur awarded English colonial planters not the ideal republican virtue of his post-Revolutionary American farmer but the "least contaminated" manners possible in a colonial condition. While his Pennsylvanians pursued a way of life superior to the depraved Spanish Peruvians, using colonization as a force toward civilization rather than degeneracy, they nonetheless proved superior only in a scale of comparison restricted to the western hemisphere and implicitly subordinate to the European seats of empire. This certainty about the relative ethical benefits of planting within a colonial American context similarly organized Crèvecoeur's painting, in which he elaborated an implied narrative of his "rural improvements." With painstaking attention to detail, he brought his immaculate and diversified plantings—an enormous orchard, varied garden plots, irrigated staple fields—together into an iconographic whole with the implements and structures involved in their production—a haying cart, a device for drawing water from the well, ten slave cabins, and a building he labeled his "Negro-kitchen."¹⁴

His attention to the physical details of his agricultural enterprise, as well as the central presence of the black plowman, also made Crèvecoeur's painting expressive of a more recent understanding of the "plantation" in the British imperial world: it was not just any parcel of cultivated, possessed American land but a large estate using enslaved labor to produce staple crops for export.¹⁵ To the side of the painting, though hardly marginally, Crèvecoeur included an image of himself as the clear master of the entire content of the painting. With streams converging at his feet, his wife seated to his side and rear, and shaded by a picturesque stand of trees, his likeness casually monitors the work of the plowman in the foreground. As a seemingly whimsical touch, Crèvecoeur painted his infant son seated on a special perch on the plow, thereby illustrating an ingenious management technique whereby he employed a single slave to free both himself and his wife to enjoy their positions of supervisory leisure. By shading the infant with an umbrella, he underlined both the whiteness of his son, and the tropicality of the sun, in an apotheosis of English *New World* colonization.

A strikingly similar scene of plowing with the infant son appeared

early in Crèvecoeur's 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer*. With impending American independence, though, came some key alterations:

This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens . . . [T]his is what may be called the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer . . . Often when I plow my low ground, I place my little boy on a chair which screws to the beam of the plough . . . As I lean over the handle, various are the thoughts which crowd into my mind. I am now doing for him, I say, what my father formerly did for me . . . [C]an more pleasure, more dignity be added to that primary occupation? The father thus ploughing with his child, and to feed his family, is inferior only to the emperor of China ploughing as an example to his kingdom.¹⁶

His painting of "The Plantation of Pine-Hill" illuminates the repressed affinity in this passage between Crèvecoeur's American farmer, "the father thus ploughing . . . to feed his family," and his seemingly arbitrary foil, "the emperor of China ploughing as an example to his kingdom." With the painting in mind, Farmer James appears in this scene to "lean over the handle" of the plow not to produce subsistence for his family but to produce a propagandist "example" of idealized republican agrarianism. Even as Crèvecoeur retained in the textual scene the focus of his painting on cultivation as the key to both possession and virtue, he created a portrait of vastly different ideological weight by writing "this new man," the American farmer of U.S. nationalization, over the American planter of his colonial painting. The act of plowing remained a constant, but whose hand was on the plow made all the difference.

These contemporaneous and clashing portraits indicate that Crèvecoeur's perception of the proper—indeed, the necessary—way to represent mainland North Americans to a European audience changed categorically in the short period between the mid-1770s and 1782, and that this shift in his representational vocabulary corresponded to the transformation in global status of the places he described. When Crèvecoeur painted "The Plantation of Pine-Hill," New York and Pennsylvania were peripheral, dependent British colonies; by the time *Letters From an American Farmer* appeared, New York and Pennsylvania were the center of a new state that declared itself separate from and equal to the powers of Europe. Established European understandings of American colonists did not suffice to define U.S. national citizens, as Crèvecoeur's revision of planter into farmer well demonstrates. Rather, the nationalization of the United States required that a sharp demarcation be drawn between past colonial status and new nationhood. If early U.S. national-

ists did not insist on restarting time from the Year One, they nonetheless required that plantations become farms, colonies become states, monarchy become republic, luxury become industry, and, of course, that slavery become liberty.¹⁷

The problem of the plantation for these conceivers of the new United States was that this form not only typified British America but also embodied the two essential sins of U.S. origin. In its older colonial sense—the sense of the Pilgrims' Plymouth Plantation or of "Rhode Island and Providence Plantations"—the plantation signified the expropriation of Indian lands. In its more recent eighteenth-century sense, it signified the crime against humanity of slavery. Worst of all, this newer incarnation of the plantation showed no sign of disappearing from the North American scene when independence was declared. The economy of the new United States continued to rely on plantation produce; and its legislators were busy constituting the new nation as a slaveholding republic. The question then becomes, "How did the plantation become 'southern' rather than 'American'?" This is a question that may be answered, at least provisionally, by reading Crèvecoeur's very early entry into the field of U.S. national literature.

One of Crèvecoeur's great achievements in the *Letters* was to develop a formula for simultaneously disavowing and acknowledging the persistence of the plantation in U.S. national life. This happens in "Letter IX: Description of Charles-Town," when he sends Farmer James to the only location south of Pennsylvania portrayed in the book—and not just to any southern location, but rather to Charleston, South Carolina, the emblematic "southern capital" of the Revolutionary era. Here the Anglo-American colonial plantation of Pine-Hill, repressed in James's descriptions of his Pennsylvania farm, returns with nightmarish intensity. To delineate Charleston, Crèvecoeur drew upon rising European metropolitan critiques of the inhumanity of New World plantation slavery, particularly those of the Abbé Raynal, to whom he dedicated the 1782 edition of the *Letters*; he likely borrowed from Raynal's description of Jamaica for the searing final image in "Letter IX" of a condemned African slave imprisoned in a cage and slowly devoured by carnivorous birds.¹⁸ By posing his American farmer in vehement opposition to the "dismal latitude" of South Carolina, Crèvecoeur converted the Anglo-American colonial past of his national "new man" from a matter of temporality into a matter of spatiality. The persistence of the plantation in the new United States registered in "Letter IX" not as a narrative process of continuous development from colony into nation, but as a geographical deviance of the southern capital from the national character.

That Crèvecoeur's South Carolina serves as a geographical repository for the persistent plantation past of his "new" American farmer becomes apparent in the very first sentence of "Letter IX," where he trades the dominant national imaginary of his book for a hemispheric span: "Charles-Town is, in the north, what Lima is in the south; both are Capitals of the richest provinces in their respective hemispheres: you may therefore conjecture, that both cities must exhibit the appearances necessarily resulting from riches." Facing Charleston, Crèvecoeur reverts from his project of national characterization back to the comparative colonialism of his pre-Revolutionary "Contrast between the Spanish & English Colonies." With the immediate comparison to Spanish Peru, South Carolina becomes a *northern* point in the colonized New World rather than a southern city in the national United States. As Crèvecoeur further situates Charleston in an exploitative Atlantic economy in the first pages of "Letter IX"—fueled by Peruvian gold, populated by West Indians, and enriched by the labor of slaves kidnapped from Guinea—he exchanges the motivating question of his inquiry into nationalization ("[W]hat then is the American?") for a meditation on the fallen nature of universal humanity ("What then is man . . .?").

While this detour to the universal might at first appear a distraction from his nation-writing project, Crèvecoeur's location of mankind's propensity for evil in Charles-Town actually works to strengthen his characterization of Farmer James. Setting a baseline of universal human evil in his southern chapter affords Crèvecoeur a foil against which to define American nationality as primarily exceptional. Whereas previously in the text he has relied upon descriptive passages recounting anecdotes and enumerating American traits, "Letter IX" enables Crèvecoeur to demonstrate the newness of the nation through juxtaposition with a "general review of human nature," as displayed in Charleston:

The history of the earth! doth it present anything but crimes of the most heinous nature, committed from one end of the world to the other? . . . [O]ne would almost believe the principles of action in man . . . to be poisoned in their most essential parts . . . Benignity, moderation, and justice, are virtues adapted only to the humble paths of life: we love to talk of virtue and to admire its beauty, while in the shade of solitude and retirement; but when we step forth into active life, if it happen to be in competition with any passion or desire, do we observe it to prevail? . . . Almost every where, liberty so natural to mankind, is refused . . . *There* the very delirium of tyranny tramples on the best gifts of nature, and sports with the fate, the happiness, the lives of millions: *there* the extreme fertility of the ground always indicates the extreme misery of the inhabitants!¹⁹

In his southern chapter, Crèvecoeur engineers a more ambitious claim for the novelty of the forming United States than any he has previously proposed, for the only exception to the "heinous" criminality of man "*almost everywhere*" is his narrator, the American farmer of the previous chapters. This yeoman citizen perfectly exemplifies the "[b]enignity, moderation, and justice" that are achieved only in "the humble paths of life"—"in the shade of solitude and retirement" that permeates Crèvecoeur's descriptions of James's Pennsylvania farm. Representative of not only English New World colonization but also all of human history, South Carolinian plantation society stands as a repository of the past against which Farmer James truly may be proved a "new man."

Crèvecoeur's concluding certainty that "*there* the extreme fertility of the ground always indicates the extreme misery of the inhabitants," in particular, reveals his adherence to the natural-philosophical theories of climatic determinism that were underwriting the expansion of European imperial ventures as he wrote. Classical theories about the influence of climate on the forms of human society had been revived for Enlightenment thinkers by Montesquieu's *On the Spirit of the Laws* (1748), which proposed that governments take their form in relation to the physical environment and that despotism increases in proportion to climatic warmth and the fertility of the soil.²⁰ As Crèvecoeur aligns Charles-Town with "[t]he fertile plains of Asia, the rich low lands of Egypt and of Diarbeck, the fruitful fields bordering on the Tigris and the Euphrates, the extensive country of the East-Indies in all its separate districts," he creates, specifically, a *tropical* American foil against which Farmer James asserts his new republican virtue: "All these must to the geographical eye seem as if intended for terrestrial paradises; but . . . though [nature's] kindest favours seem to be shed on those beautiful regions with the most profuse hand, yet there in general we find the most wretched people in the world."²¹

Acknowledging American tropicality is an important rhetorical move on Crèvecoeur's part, since European discourses of New World colonization, ranging from scientific theories of climatic determinism to literary conventions of exoticism, had for more than two centuries defined American possessions in terms of their warmth and agricultural productivity.²² By ordering "Letter IX" around James's refrain of incredulous observation and passionate rejection of Charles-Town, Crèvecoeur stresses the temperateness of his American farmer: James's geographic and moral estrangement from the tropics of his predecessor, the American planter.

Thus planters get rich; so raw, so unexperienced am I in this mode of life, that were I to be possessed of a plantation, and my slaves treated as in gen-

eral they are here, never could I rest in peace . . . Can it be possible that the force of custom should ever make me . . . as insensible to the injustice of [the slave] trade . . . as the rich inhabitants of this town seem to be? . . . I have not resided here long enough to become insensible of pain for the objects which I every day behold.²³

Farmer James's innocence of American plantation slavery is predicated upon his geographic distance from Charles-Town, upon the simple fact that he does not "reside *here*" but is simply passing through. (To stay for "long enough," the logic of climatic determinism dictates and his rhetorical "can it be possible" insists, would be to succumb to the environment and "the force of [local] custom.") As Farmer James carefully invokes the spatial remove of his national identity from the "barbarous" tropical scenes he witnesses, he assumes the conventional pose of an eighteenth-century metropolitan traveler writing about colonial possessions: he denies his own implication in the violence of plantation production he records at the same time that he naturalizes that violence with the latest natural-philosophical theories.²⁴ Crèvecoeur's southern letter markedly diverges in style and tone from the rest of the book, for it unmistakably echoes European imperial accounts of the American colonies while including "almost nothing original, nothing that demonstrates direct and personal observation."²⁵ Indeed, Crèvecoeur himself acknowledged this divergence of perspective when he retitled the Charles-Town chapter "Lettre d'un Voyageur Européen" in the first French edition of the *Letters*.²⁶

By aligning his simultaneously exoticizing and condemnatory account of Charles-Town with the presumed responses of his metropolitan readers, Crèvecoeur presents Farmer James not as a colonial American but rather as an equal among citizens of the nations of the world. His definitional opposition of the new man of U.S. nationality to the old plantation society of Charles-Town culminates at the close of "Letter IX," when James, while walking through a wood on a "perfectly calm and sultry" afternoon, comes face to face with an icon of tropical depravity, the condemned African in a cage hanging suspended from a tree:

I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek-bones were bare . . . From the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped, and tinged the ground beneath. . . . I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled; I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this Negro, in all [its] dismal latitude.²⁷

In this archetypal juxtaposition, Crèvecoeur's "new man" proves his break with his colonial past as his very physical being intrinsically rejects

an embodiment of American plantation slavery. Here Crèvecoeur distills his characterization of U.S. nationality to its organic essence: the "involuntary shudder" that denies—simultaneously—the colonial origins of the American nation, and the blood-soaked ground and "dismal latitude" of South Carolina.

This mythopoetic scene so crystallized the nationalizing transformations of the emerging United States that Crèvecoeur's European readers quickly seized upon it, making the final paragraph of "Letter IX" the most often-cited and controversial passage of the *Letters* at the time of its publication. While some commentators friendly to nascent metropolitan antislavery thought defended Crèvecoeur's inclusion of the scene, prevailing opinion indicted it as a fraud, a formulaic figure of horror inserted by the author in the midst of the direct observation that was supposed to set the *Letters* apart from other accounts of the rebelling American colonies available in Europe. Crèvecoeur was faulted for not having visited South Carolina in reality and for having fabricated the sensational image of the tortured African to serve his own political purposes.²⁸ He capitulated to the criticism by 1787, when he expunged the scene from all subsequent editions of the *Lettres*, ostensibly out of concern "pour l'honneur des Caroliniens."²⁹

His voluntary deconstruction of "Letter IX" hardly seems necessary given the extent to which the 1782 volume already self-destructs around this southern letter. At the moral center of the letter, Crèvecoeur has created a primary representative equation in which U.S. national distinctiveness is defined through juxtaposition with the horribly mutilated body of a black man: an equation through which he seeks—impossibly!—to deny both the immediate colonial past of the American Farmer and the internal state of South Carolina that lies within the borders of James's new republic.³⁰ The wishfully purgative scene immediately implicates Farmer James in the plantation violence against which he is defined, for no South Carolinian slave masters appear in "Letter IX"; instead, it is Crèvecoeur's narrator who stands locked into the binary of racialized Anglo-American plantation slavery, facing the slave in the position of master. The only dialogue in the chapter is the African's response, rendered in dialect, to James's giving him water—"Tankè, you white man, tankè you"—a speech that further inscribes the narrator within the binary, naturalizing his whiteness as perceivable without sight or sound and emphasizing Farmer James's domination even at the level of language.³¹

Just as Farmer James's implication in the tropical depravity of Charles-Town emerges at the climax of his opposition to it, so Crèvecoeur's own Hudson Valley plantation returns in precisely the letter that seeks to

quarantine that emblematic Anglo-American colonial form in the south of the new United States. In a frequently overlooked passage in "Letter IX," James is moved by his reflection on the horrors of South Carolina to provide a description of his own agricultural practices, which are quite at odds with his previous elaborations of the yeoman ideal:

We have slaves likewise in our northern provinces; I hope the time draws near when they will be all emancipated: but how different their lot, how different their situation, in every possible respect! They enjoy as much liberty as their masters, they are as well clad, and as well fed; in health and sickness they are tenderly taken care of; they . . . are, truly speaking, a part of our families. Many of them are taught to read and write . . . [T]hey are indulged in educating, cherishing, and chastising their children, who are taught subordination to them as to their lawful parents: in short, they participate in many of the benefits of our society, without being obliged to bear any of its burthens.

This preemptively exculpatory passage makes sense only if we recall Crèvecoeur's pre-Revolutionary painting and then see in "Letter IX" his attempt to relocate the plowman and the hierarchy of that portrait southward. His portrayal of slave labor in Charles-Town furthers the return of his own repressed plantation: rather than depicting the horrid working conditions particular to Low Country production of indigo and rice, Crèvecoeur imagines slaves in South Carolina as "those who till the earth, who carry burdens, who convert the logs into useful boards"—all work more likely performed at the New York "Plantation of Pine-Hill. The first tree of which was cut down in ye year of our Lord 1770."³²

Small wonder that Crèvecoeur's Farmer James at the end of "Letter IX" remains "[o]ppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me," for the southern letter can achieve only incomplete catharsis. Crèvecoeur's attempt to define a national "new man" against his own colonial origins, and to define a new nation against its own southern reaches, leads to a powerful reassertion of the American plantation that persists despite the political independence of the United States. The *dying* slave in the cage metaphorizes James's "hope [that] the time draws near when they shall all be emancipated," embodying the desire of early American nationalists to see the exploitative colonial economic basis of the new United States as inevitably passing out of existence. The terror of the archetypal scene lies in the fact that James is "unable" to eliminate the suffering African from the American scene: "Had I had a ball in my gun, I certainly should have dispatched him, but finding myself unable to perform so kind an office, I sought, though trembling, to relieve him as well as I could." (And indeed, a deeper terror of the scene lies in

James's failure of imagination as to how the intolerable suffering of the caged African might be alleviated: speeding his execution is the only solution that occurs to the narrator. To free the African from the cage, to bind up his wounds, is out of the question.) However much writer or reader might wish it, the dying slave does not disappear from the new United States, but still lives, still suffers, still speaks: "Two days, and me no die; the birds, the birds; aaah me!"³³

So while this climactic "melancholy scene," as the subtitle of "Letter IX" terms it, superficially appears to offer a clear parable of new republican virtue versus static colonial barbarism—and while it has for decades been read as such in the United States, becoming one of the canonical primal scenes of our national literature—Crèvecoeur's southern letter actually serves as the pivot around which his nationalist characterization of the American farmer collapses. In the remaining three letters of the 1782 book, James's stated task of narrating the "new man" of U.S. nationality drops out of view: in "Letter X," he trades describing American people for describing American animals but becomes captivated by the image of a murderous black snake that seems to metaphorize Raynal's prophecy of apocalyptic New World slave revolts; in "Letter XI," Farmer James disappears entirely as narrator, replaced by Crèvecoeur with a "Russian Gentleman," a figure antithetical to U.S. republicanism; and in the final letter, Farmer James prepares to commit characterological suicide by abandoning the farm that has defined him, under the duress of the colonial rebellion that loyalist Crèvecoeur elsewhere would term a "civil war."

The arc of this ideological dissolution of Crèvecoeur's "new man" at the end of the *Letters* is telegraphed by the author in the curt final lines with which he ends his southern letter, after the face-off between his narrator and the tortured African:

I mustered strength enough to walk away, and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine. There . . . [t]hey told me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary; and supported the doctrine of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice; with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present. Adieu.³⁴

Crèvecoeur's location of a distilled, dystopic vision of Anglo-American coloniality in Charles-Town has permitted him to purge the plantation from Farmer James's Pennsylvania (and his own New York), but has nonetheless fixed that emblematic old American term firmly within the political borders of the new United States. His wishfully self-sufficient, agrarian, "new" narrator thus remains fully enmeshed in the old Manichaean

dualism of plantation slavery, "walking away" from the suffering African to break bread with his tormentors, and in the process choosing sides in a projected American race war according to "the laws of self-preservation." Even as he tacitly acquiesces to the old racist order of Anglo-American colonial slavery, Farmer James desperately attempts to maintain distance between his republican nationality and the depravity of his southern hosts by inscribing an additional civil division within the new U.S. borders through his use of first and third person: "I"/"we" for his "new man" against "they" for the denizens of "the southern provinces." By the close of this allegorical scene, Crèvecoeur seems to have decided that nationalizing Americans may not have achieved, after all, the popular cohesion and cultural independence that would authorize their self-narration. With the final French farewell, "Adieu," Crèvecoeur imperiously silences James and abruptly evacuates himself from the project of narrating the new republic, rejecting the ideological chaos generated when the "new" American farmer confronts his all-too-present plantation past.

The Southern Status Quo in Paine's Revolutionary Magazine

Few Revolutionary-era authors in the emerging United States shared Crèvecoeur's recourse to a European metropolitan authorial identity, his ability to insert the Atlantic Ocean between his enlightened ideals and their contradiction in American reality. In order to articulate and explore the problem of the persistent plantation in the new American republic, though, much of the literature that early U.S. authors wrote used precisely the same volatile, intransigent geography that sent Crèvecoeur running back to France, at least textually, at the end of "Letter IX." Although Thomas Paine, for one, shared none of Crèvecoeur's ambivalence about colonial independence, his first American nationalist production participated in a similar pattern. As editor and author of much of the content of the Philadelphia-based *Pennsylvania Magazine*, beginning two months after his arrival in America from England in late 1774 and continuing into 1776, Paine spurned established British imperial characterizations of the North American mainland colonies as inadequate for describing the advanced development of most of those colonies toward independent nationhood.³⁵ In direct contradiction to this overall program of nationalist self-definition, though, he featured the five southernmost colonies, Maryland through Georgia, in the pages of his magazine *only* in terms of those British imperial descriptions he elsewhere rejected. The narrative of American national emergence projected across the issues of Paine's magazine thus remained weirdly shadowed by an assurance of southern stasis.

This unexpected exemption of the southern colonies from the rest of Paine's North American revolutionary geography had its origin in the fact that the *Pennsylvania Magazine* was defined as a specifically literary publication, in contradistinction to the political discourse Paine would take up so brilliantly in *Common Sense* in the waning days of his editorship. The prominent Philadelphia publisher of the magazine, Robert Aitken, had explicitly confined the purview of the periodical to "philosophical disquisition," "excluding the [political] controversies" of the months preceding the Declaration of Independence.³⁶ Aitken's literary-vs.-political distinction was no real impediment for Paine, though, who from his introductory editorial for the first issue, "Utility of this Work Evinced," argued that the emergence of an explicitly literary publication in America was itself a sign of impending independence. Taking his readers through a schematic history of British America, Paine specified the form of publication appropriate to each stage of colonial development, ending with the very existence of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* as evidence that the North American colonies had outgrown their plantation function as peripheral sites for the production of Britain's staple commodities. "In the early days of colonization," he began, oral communication within small settler outposts sufficed: "A whisper was almost sufficient to have registered all our internal concerns." With greater population and rising towns, local newspapers had appeared, "but their plan being almost wholly devoted to news and commerce," it was by 1775 "somewhat strange that the channels of communication should continue so narrow and limited." "America has now outgrown the state of infancy," Paine declared; and consequently the uniting colonies required the new literary magazine form to serve as the creative "nursery of genius" for the rising nation, by re-presenting British North America as its own center of manufacturing, and—most important—of knowledge production.³⁷ Symbolically generated by the emerging material independence of the mainland colonies, and generating the mental independence of their inhabitants, the *Pennsylvania Magazine* as Paine formulated it gained the widest circulation of any previous American periodical in just a few months.³⁸

But Paine's equation of nationalization with literary production necessarily highlighted the uneven development of print production across the North American colonies that soon would join in rebellion. As his inaugural editorial made clear, to establish the American cultural independence he proclaimed required a twofold move of geographical recentering. Paine sought foremost to relocate the metropolitan cultural authority of London over the colonies to the western side of the Atlantic by supplanting the "importation" of "the British magazines" that were simply "the retailers of tale and nonsense" on American matters. At the same time,

though, he sought to establish a new center among the uniting colonies by surmounting the too-local focus of colonial newspapers to create a proto-national "market for wit and utility" in his pages that would allow "men of abilities" from throughout North America to "collect and convey" their "inventions" to the broadest possible American "public."

The metropolitan ambition of Paine's Philadelphia publication registered in both its form and its content. Formally, the magazine was designed to resemble respected London periodicals such as "the *Gentleman's*, the *London*, and the *Universal Magazines*," all cited by Paine with grudging admiration: it was extensively illustrated with exclusive engravings, ostentatiously produced "for the *Pennsylvania Magazine*," and it featured original essays and poems authored by American correspondents rather than reprints of extracts from other publications.³⁹ The content of both illustration and text, fittingly, skewed toward detailing the developmental attainments of the North American colonies, providing site-specific descriptions of major cities, ports, and public buildings; reports of innovations in technological apparatus and manufacturing processes; and scholarly investigations from the scientific to the philosophical. Paine also carefully ensured that each of the uniting colonies was featured in the pages of the magazine during his editorial tenure, and the contents of every number boasted a broad North American geographic span. This first self-consciously metropolitan American periodical thereby implied a new cultural nationalism whose imaginative extent matched the boundaries of the emerging United States: a cultural nationalism that would, as Johann Gottlieb Fichte defined it several decades later, make the external borders of the forming nation into the internal borders of consciousness of its subjects.⁴⁰

Yet Paine had very different sorts of material available to him with which to depict the colonies north of Philadelphia, as opposed to those south of it, due to the uneven development of print production in the emerging northeastern American core and in the southern mainland colonies. While the local newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides that Paine deemed suitable to a colonial condition were printed in towns and counties in all of the thirteen colonies contemplating and organizing their alliance against Britain, the Philadelphia-to-Boston corridor was emerging in the 1770s as the uncontested center of North American literary production.⁴¹ With almost every nationalizing literary text—those magazines, histories, textbooks, and novels that aspired to supralocal audiences—published between Philadelphia and Boston from the late 1770s through the 1790s, the southern states were geographically distant from and marginal to U.S. literary production from its very beginnings.⁴² While Paine

was able to "collect and convey" direct observation from correspondents in the northeastern colonies to counter British imperial depictions of that American periphery, he faced a dearth of such self-representational print (as opposed to simple news reports) from the southern colonies.⁴³ To include the colonies from Maryland to Georgia in his pages, Paine resorted to replicating precisely those British imperial accounts of peripheral staple production that were anathema elsewhere in the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. So while the overarching import of Paine's revolutionary magazine was to prove that the North American colonies had outgrown their plantation function, his nationalizing publication paradoxically presented the southern among those colonies as circumscribed by exactly that peripheral status quo.

This proto-national representational paradox appears strikingly in any comparison of Paine's treatment of a locale north of Philadelphia with his treatment of a locale to its south. For example, the engraving titled "A

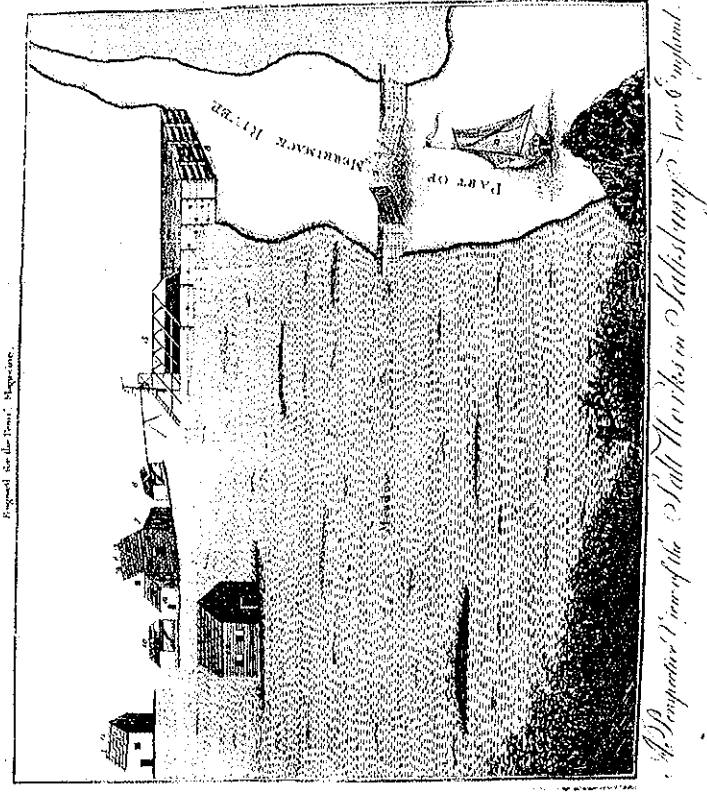


Figure 3. "A Perspective View of the Salt Works in Salisbury New England," *Pennsylvania Magazine*, March 1775. Sinclair Hamilton Collection, Graphic Arts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Perspective View of the Salt Works in Salisbury New England" appeared in the March 1776 number of the magazine along with an article on salt production authored by Paine and rather deceptively titled "An Extract from a Treatise entitled, The Art of Making Common Salt as now practised in most parts of the World. By William Brownrigg, M.D. F.R.S."⁴⁴ The title of the article, with its obsequious bow to London's metropolitan authority over manufacturing around the globe, quickly proved satiric: Paine quoted a short passage from this "Fellow of the Royal Society" only to eviscerate Brownrigg's text as "in some parts obscure, and in others imperfect": "The *grand principle* of the operation . . . the Dr. saith . . . is to throw the sea water into a large surface, and thereby cause the watery parts to be evaporated." Ridiculing the authoritative British treatise on salt manufacture as risibly simple-minded, Paine called for American innovation in the field: "An ingenious operator may apply this principle [evaporation] in many methods different from that above described, and perhaps in some that may be more profitable." Paine's call for American technological development then became an instant and gratifying reality for his readers as they unfolded the accompanying site-specific plate of the Massachusetts "Salt Works." This detailed thirteen-point engraving—exhibiting a complexity presumably utterly beyond the grasp of Dr. Brownrigg, F.R.S.—potently proved that the transformation from periphery to core was already under way for the uniting colonies. The "perspective view" of the engraving emphasized the domestic direct observation of this American innovation, further discrediting the flattening uselessness of Brownrigg's omniscient London vantage on "most parts of the World."

By contrast, the "New Map of North & South Carolina & Georgia," included in the June 1776 number of the magazine, literally reproduced Britain's flattened imperial perspective on its American periphery.⁴⁵ This map was not "new" at all; rather, it indifferently plagiarized a part of a 1755 map of North America published in London by the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations.⁴⁶ Marked off in "British Statute Miles," this plagiarized map presented only such information as would be useful to the broadest imperial territorial administration. The borders of the three rebelling colonies pictured are not even accurately rendered, because the 1755 source map was focused on marking British territory as opposed to French territory and on recording the presence of native tribes, rather than charting the shape of individual colonial administrative units. In contradiction to the evidence of development assiduously recorded in the "Salt Works" engraving, the "New Map" presented no evidence whatsoever of development, and indeed very little evidence

Figure 4. "A New Map of North & South Carolina & Georgia," Pennsylvania Magazine, June 1776. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



even of settlement; instead, following its 1755 source, it detailed only the physical aids and impediments to administration from abroad, including ports, navigable waterways, and mountain ranges, in addition to the presence of tribes and competing French colonial claims. Indeed, more native tribal "Old Towns"—sites of major Indian settlements that had been abandoned before British incursions into the area—were denoted on this "New Map" than were the extant towns across these three southern colonies that were in the process of declaring themselves independent states.

The essay accompanying the engraving, "An Account of the Colonies of North and South Carolina, with Georgia," similarly contained no information that could not have been gleaned from British sources, rather than seeking to supplant the imperial authority of London with domestic American observation. The essay provided, quite literally, an imperial record-keeping *account* of these southern colonies as peripheral plantations, moving from a description of territorial extent ("being 700 miles long, and 380 broad"), to a catalogue of "staple commodities" produced for export, and finally to an aggregate valuation of those commodities in pounds sterling.⁴⁷ Readers wishing more detail were directed to no "perspective view" of a specific site or innovation in one of these colonies, but rather to a two-page table compiled for the Crown by the "Comptroller of his Majesty's Customs in the Port of Savannah," showing "An Aggregate and Valuation of the Exports of Produce from the Province of Georgia, from the year 1754 to 1773."⁴⁸ When it came to envisioning the southern colonies, Paine asked his readers not to throw off London's definition of plantation America, but to embrace it.

The essays describing the southern colonies in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* seemed designed to remind readers that, just as American plantation production underwrote the wealth of the British metropolitan core, so could it be harnessed to fund the growing development of an independent American nation. The rousing conclusion to the April 1776 article "Some Account of the Colony of Virginia," for example, informed readers that "the whole exportation of Virginia, including that of Maryland" significantly exceeded the value of the total exports of the mother country, while "the duty paid on the single article of tobacco exported to Great-Britain, comes to 351,675 l. sterl. and employed 330 sail of ships, and 3960 seamen, annually."⁴⁹ Southern statistics such as these manifested a form of proto-nationalist intent fundamentally different from the proofs of development in the middle and eastern colonies elsewhere in the magazine: if the American periphery of Virginia and Maryland alone produced more wealth for Britain than Britain itself produced, then how

rich and powerful might the united colonists become by throwing off the yoke of duties to London and controlling southern staple production themselves? The magazine thus prognosticated a future role for the southern colonies opposite to that of their eight neighbors to the north; they would enrich the independent American nation not by developing, but by remaining the same. Indeed, Paine's southern "accounts" suggested to readers that tallying the value of one's plantations was itself a part of the process of nationalization.

Paine's exemption of the southern colonies from his larger narrative of developmental nationalization was farther underwritten by his conflation of those five colonies into a totalized whole. While it would have seemed absurd to Paine to publish "an Account of New York and Pennsylvania, with New Jersey," he treated the southern colonies without exception as cohesive and indistinguishable in their plantation functions. Articles that amalgamated the staple commodity production of "North & South Carolina, with Georgia" or "Virginia, including Maryland" created a flattened figure, which I will call the "Plantation South," that served as both a counterpoint to American modernization and an intrinsic enabling part of it. But this Plantation South appeared *only* from the vantage point of proto-national literary production. Such conflation counteracted the political imperatives of confederation, which regarded each of the thirteen rebelling colonies as more or less autonomous administrative units. Paine's *Pennsylvania Magazine* shows that an imaginative figure of the Plantation South came into being with the birth of a self-consciously independent nationalist literature in the United States—both as a product of that literature and as one of its great enabling fictions.

From this moment of origin, the Plantation South was an alienated yet intrinsic part of the emergent U.S. national imaginary. Coverage of the first military engagements of the Revolutionary War in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* illustrates this duality. Against the cognizance—and suspicion—of regional differences in accents, manners, and even military tactics that grew as Americans from different former colonies came into contact with each other at the continental congresses and in the armies, Paine sought to help the rebelling colonialists internalize a common cause, to help a citizen of Massachusetts come to feel that he was engaged in a common enterprise with a citizen of South Carolina, by including reports from the farthest reaches of the forming nation in the pages of his journal. But the pattern of restricting the southern colonies to their territorial and productive functions, in contradistinction to the dominant narrative of national development, only intensified in the magazine as military conflicts escalated. Battles in the environs of Boston were illustrated with perspectival

scenes such as Aitken's engraving of a "Correct View of the Late Battle at Charlestown [Mass.]," that attested to eyewitness observation of the conflict from an unapologetically partisan American point of view. Such a detailed, animated scene was calculated to elicit an emotional charge from its viewers by portraying a predatory British army invading American shores from the Atlantic and by recording the smoke and carnage of the fight. Clashes in the southern colonies, on the other hand, were illustrated purely in terms of territory gained or lost—as in a map that purported to show "Lord Dunmore's deprivations" in Virginia but actually gave an overhead view of "the Maritime Parts" of the colony at stake in the conflict.⁵⁰ While readers were directed to visualize the sufferings and heroism of Americans fighting for independence to the north of Philadelphia, they were encouraged to think of the stakes of battles south of Philadelphia as restricted to ports, trade, and pounds sterling. In other words, Paine's American readers were asked to interest themselves in battles in the southern colonies in precisely the way that metropolitan British readers would interest themselves.

This early imaginative alienation of the Plantation South from the broader narrative of U.S. independence attests to the physical alienation of the five southern colonies not only from the production of emerging nationalist literature but also from its consumption. While early nationalist texts like Paine's *Pennsylvania Magazine* were intended for wide distribution, as often evidenced by their attached subscriber lists and bookseller agreements, they were purchased mostly in and around the core area in which they were produced.⁵¹ This geographic concentration of writers, publishers, and the great majority of readers in the developing northeastern core dictated that the U.S. reader/citizen produced in early national literature, as well as the imagined national community constructed in these texts, not only was white, male, middle-class, and urban, but also was *not* southern. Intellectual historians of the early republic long have held that U.S. partisans defined the new nation through a rhetorical process of " juxtaposition with others," that early U.S. national identity took its shape from a panoply of various and overlapping oppositions to populations both inside and outside the new national borders.⁵² Though it was surely not Paine's intent, the southern "accounts" of his *Pennsylvania Magazine* presented the Plantation South as just such an oppositional term for the formation of U.S. national identity.

Exhibited in terms directly imported from British imperial depictions in Paine's pages, the meaning of this Plantation South for the new national project appeared undifferentiated from its established peripheral function in enriching the old British Empire. Exempted from the other-

wise pervasive reports of progress and development in the magazine, the southern colonies appeared as no candidates for contribution to the rising national "genius." Instead, to put it glibly, they were to be valued for their bodies rather than their minds. While Paine's centralizing mission led him assiduously to include each of the thirteen rebelling colonies in the pages of his magazine, this very inclusivity highlighted the dearth of locally produced self-representations south of Philadelphia. Paine's Revolutionary magazine inscribed a Plantation South unchanged by independence—bearing its colonial past into the U.S. national future—as both a part of, and a counterpoint to, the dominant narrative of American nationalization.