

## **The Farmer as a Problematic Figure: Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer***

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### **Abstract**

Two hundred and thirty years after its publication, Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) still grips general readers and literary critics of American literature. Modern critics, however, question many of its implicit assumptions. This paper first traces Crèvecoeur's influence by Enlightenment doctrines, especially physiocratic beliefs, and examines how Crèvecoeur's notion of the farmer challenges the "American degeneracy" theory and contributes to his New World vision. It then proceeds to explore how the notion of the (freehold) farmer as *the* representative American creates controversies to such an extent that in the end the farmer ends up not as a representative American but as a problematic figure.

**Key words:** Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, the (freehold) farmer, Americanness

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## 有爭議性的農夫：克列夫科的《一個美國農夫的來信》

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### 摘要

出版了兩百三十年之後，克列夫科的《一個美國農夫的來信》依然深植人心。現代批評家卻質疑書中許多隱而不顯的假設。本文首先追溯克列夫科如何受到啟蒙時代主張，尤其是重農主義理念的影響，探討克列夫科對農夫的想法如何挑戰「美洲的退化」的理論，從而促成他的新大陸的願景。本文接著探討以農夫作為代表性的美國人的想法滋生爭議，以至於最後農夫已不是代表性的美國人，而成為有爭議性的人物/意象。

**關鍵詞：**克列夫科、《一個美國農夫的來信》、(擁有不動產的)農夫、美國性

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## Introduction

Two hundred and thirty years after its publication in London by Davies and Davis, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), especially Letter III, "What Is an American?," still grips general readers and literary critics of American literature. Advertised to be "the genuine production of the American Farmer whose name they bear [J. Hector St. John]," thus containing "authentic information," *Letters* was published "at a time when every body's [sic] attention is directed toward the affairs of America."<sup>1</sup> The book was, therefore, an instant success in England as well as in many other parts of Europe, and it was immediately translated into French, Dutch, and German. On the other hand, *Letters* enjoyed only a moderate success in the U.S. Its first American edition, published in 1793 by Matthew Carey, did not sell as expected. In the nineteenth century, it even fell into oblivion. In the twentieth century, however, thanks to D. H. Lawrence and many other critics as well as a new wave of "polyglot mass immigration" (Cunliffe 143) and the emergence of American Studies, the book regained its popularity, establishing itself as a classic in early American literature.<sup>2</sup> In his "Introduction," Albert E. Stone extols the book: "American literature, as the voice of our national consciousness, begins in 1782, with the first publication in England of *Letters from an American Farmer*" (7).<sup>3</sup>

No sooner had *Letters* secured its status as a "foundational text" (Jehlen, "Travel Writing" 142) than critics questioned many of its implicit assumptions, especially the notion of the farmer as *the* representative American. Sometime during the 1970s critics began to offer new readings of Crèvecoeur's *Letters*, with a view to revising former interpretations and exploring the implications of Crèvecoeur's ideologies in the text. David J. Carlson, for instance, argues that the emergence of American Studies as a field during the 1940s and 1950s "provided the vital context in which *Letters* was finally established as both a core scripture of American exceptionalism and a classic formulation of the ideal of the ethnic melting pot" ("Crèvecoeur's *Letters*" 547). The "ideological pressures of the cold war period," Carlson adds, demand "defining and celebrating a singular American experience" (548). The celebration of such an experience contributed to Crèvecoeur's resurrection but also "influenced the reception of Crèvecoeur's work in potentially misleading ways" (548). One of the "misleading ways" which influenced the reception of Crèvecoeur's work is how *Letters* is anthologized. Anthologizers' favorite is Letter III, "What Is an American?" But it is only excerpted, omitting "History of Andrew, the Hebridean" and thus containing less than half of the whole letter. The result of

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<sup>1</sup> "Advertisements" to the first edition (1782). The quotations appear on p. 35, in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. with an introduction by Albert E. Stone (N.Y.: Penguin, 1986). All quotations of *Letters* and *Sketches* are from this edition. *Sketches* was actually edited by Henri L. Bourdin, Ralph H. Gabriel, and Stanley T. Williams, and published in 1925 by Yale University Press. Based on Crèvecoeur's manuscripts, Dennis D. Moore re-edited *Sketches* and published *More Letters from the American Farmer* in 1995. *More Letters* aimed specifically to address the controversies Bourdin, Gabriel, and Williams's edition had occasioned. It retains virtually all of Crèvecoeur's manuscript forms, and it would be technically difficult to quote from this edition. Therefore, I use Stone's edition because it is still the edition most critics refer to. This paper does not quote from the controversial chapters in Bourdin, Gabriel, and Williams's edition. For controversies about this edition, refer to Moore's "Introduction" (xi-lxiv).

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the reception of *Letters*, see Stone, "Introduction," 7-9; Cunliffe, "Crèvecoeur Revisited," 132-33, 139-40; and Carlson, "Farmer versus Lawyer," 257-58.

<sup>3</sup> Stone's "Introduction" first appeared in his 1963 edition of *Letters*. In 1981, he incorporated Bourdin, Gabriel, and Williams's *Sketches* into the book and rewrote the introduction. The quote appeared in both editions. Here I quote from the 1986 reprint.

anthologizing only this letter is that the idealized farmer is represented as a typical American, and the farm life Farmer James lives is enveloped in an aura and becomes the “pastoral ideal in a New World setting”; indeed, the image of the landscape “achieves mythic magnitude” (Marx 108, 111). Letter III thus paints a rosy picture for immigrants, and Farmer James’s “singular American experience,” the American Dream now, promises to be within every immigrant’s reach. Although some anthologies later add Letter IX, “Description of Charles Town; Thoughts on Slavery; On Physical Evil; A Melancholy Scene” and Letter XII, “Distresses of a Frontier Man,” the keynote of the dream, for most readers, seems unchanged.

Nevertheless, recent critics read Crèvecoeur from new perspectives. *Letters*, which was routinely considered as a bunch of discrete sketches, is increasingly treated as a formal whole, believed to be selected, arranged, and given its final shape by Crèvecoeur himself.<sup>4</sup> Crèvecoeur’s influences by or contacts with contemporary European philosophers or intellectuals, like John Locke, Abbé Raynal (Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, 1713-1796), Buffon (Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, 1707-1788), and French physiocrats are explored, confirming Crèvecoeur’s ambition to join in the transatlantic network of men of letters. Varied subjects in Crèvecoeur’s texts are rigorously investigated to examine the overtones of the notion of the American farmer. My paper proposes to reread Crèvecoeur in light of recent scholarship. The first part of the paper explores Crèvecoeur’s influence by Enlightenment doctrines, especially by Abbé Raynal’s physiocratic beliefs. Crèvecoeur follows Raynal’s beliefs but also challenges them in his fashioning of the farmer as the representative American. In the second part of my paper I concentrate on the issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, and the way these issues are related to the notion of the farmer in the book. Crèvecoeur idealizes the farmer as *the* representative American. Upon careful examination, however, his notion of the farmer applies specifically to the freehold farmer, a farmer whose ownership of land is associated with respectable gentility. Such a notion of the farmer is ambivalent toward women and the land, and it is race- and class-biased; it, therefore, creates controversies, which I aim to investigate in this paper. Although Crèvecoeur envisions people in the New World as having a second chance to begin the world anew, his vision is implicated in controversies of diverse forms and shapes, and his notion of the freehold farmer is at the very core of the controversies.

### **Enlightenment Doctrines, American Degeneracy Theory, and Crèvecoeur’s New World Vision**

Crèvecoeur was born on January 31, 1735, in Caen, Normandy, and attended the Jesuit Collège Royal de Bourbon.<sup>5</sup> When nineteen, he visited relatives in Salisbury, England, and, living there for one year, acquired a degree of mastery of the English language. He then enlisted in the French colonial army in New France (Canada), serving as an officer under General Montcalm in the French and Indian War (1754-1763). He was wounded in the battle for Quebec in 1759 and, after recovery, resigned his commission as second lieutenant under unknown circumstances. He arrived in New York City the same year, adopted a new name, J. Hector St. John, and made several prolonged exploring

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<sup>4</sup> A. W. Plumstead, for instance, advances a compelling argument about this in “Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur.”

<sup>5</sup> For Crèvecoeur’s biography, refer to Gay Wilson Allen and Roger Asselineau, *St. John de Crèvecoeur: The Life of an American Farmer* (1987). Despite a few critics’ complaints about some inaccuracies in the book, this is still the most updated biography of Crèvecoeur. Also useful is Thomas Philbrick, *St. John de Crèvecoeur*, especially pp. 15-40.

expeditions in the following years, leading historian Vernon Parrington to comment: "Perhaps no other man before the Revolution was so intimately acquainted with the French and English colonies as a whole, with their near background of frontier and the great wilderness beyond, as this French American" (qtd. in Stone 10). In 1769, he became a naturalized citizen of New York and thus a subject of England, his home country's bitter foe. After marrying Mehetable Tippet of Westchester, he bought 120 acres of land in Orange County and named it "Pine Hill." The period from his settlement in Pine Hill to the Revolution was, according to Crèvecoeur, the happiest days of his life, and *Letters* and *Sketches*, or at least most of them, were composed during this period. The Revolutionary war brought the happy days to an end because of Crèvecoeur's loyalist leanings.<sup>6</sup> In 1779, he planned to leave New York City for France, partly to avert confrontations with local patriots and partly to secure his son Ally's inheritance in Caen. Along with the six-year-old Ally, he brought with him a trunk full of manuscripts, containing about thirty-two sketches. Imprisoned by the British for a few months, he was released on bond and sailed for England. In London he sold part of his manuscripts to Davies and Davis, Samuel Johnson's publisher, and went on to France. *Letters* came out in 1782 and quickly saw a new edition in 1783, which incorporated corrections made by Crèvecoeur himself.

Early critics do not consider *Letters* as a coherent whole because they fail to see the sketches as having a unified "plot" or theme. Elayne Antler Rapping's "Theory and Experience in Crèvecoeur's America" (1967) plays a vital role in Crèvecoeur criticism. Starting with the premise that "Crèvecoeur recognized that the new nation took its form from a complex of literary and philosophic ideas which came together and found expression in eighteenth-century Europe," Rapping proceeds to proclaim that the Age of Enlightenment was also "the age in which a new nation was being established on a newly settled land, offering an opportunity to test these theories" (707). The Enlightenment literary and philosophic ideas provide Farmer James with a model, based particularly on a faith in human reason and a benevolent, intelligible natural world, on which to build an agrarian democracy. Equipping himself with such a model in the first three letters, James then "moves out of his community and begins to tour the country" in the next few letters to test to what extent this model can be realized in the New World. The result is somewhat disappointing because James is disillusioned about a number of corrupted practices, among them slavery. With the imminence of the Revolution in the final letter, the model, especially in respect of pursuing self-interest while serving the interest of the greatest good, disintegrates. In Rapping's reading, "both James and his country are being tested against a set of theories which the European has provided," but the model provides "a false view of the world" and thus will not stand the test of experience (708).

Rapping's "theory and experience" provides a model for structuring *Letters* as a whole, while also situating James's dream of an agrarian democracy in a transatlantic Enlightenment context instead of a nation-based paradigm.<sup>7</sup> According to Rapping, the whole book is thematically structured on the formulation of Enlightenment beliefs and the subsequent disillusionment. Likewise, Mary E. Rucker also stresses Crèvecoeur's influence by Enlightenment doctrines: the ideal value of an agrarian democracy, the validity of an economic system based on the pursuit of self-interest, the responsibility of government to ensure the general welfare, the deterministic force of physical and social environments, and the order, intelligibility, and benevolence of the universe (193). For

<sup>6</sup> Crèvecoeur was generally believed to be a loyalist to the British Crown or, some claim, an Anglophile. See Pierre Aubèry, "St. John de Crèvecoeur: A Case History in Literary Anglomania."

<sup>7</sup> Rapping is, of course, far from the first critic to bring up the transatlantic connection. She is, however, able to weave together the Enlightenment ideals with U.S. nationalistic ideals in a cogent way and thus helps to explain how *Letters* can be read as a formal whole.

Rucker, however, these doctrines are mere assumptions. She therefore concludes her essay by remarking that Crèvecoeur “reveals through James’s pathetic losses the folly of a too ready acceptance of these assumptions” (211).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, both Rapping and Rucker emphasize the importance of Enlightenment doctrines to Crèvecoeur. Abbé Raynal was prominent among the Enlightenment intelligentsia who advocated these doctrines. He made a notable impact on Crèvecoeur, but it is also Raynal’s theory of the American degeneracy and physiocratic beliefs that Crèvecoeur responded and took exception to in *Letters*.

Crèvecoeur dedicated *Letters* to Abbé Raynal. After reading Raynal’s *Political and Philosophical History*,<sup>9</sup> Crèvecoeur was greatly inspired: “For the first time in my life I reflected on the relative state of nations; I traced the extended ramifications of a commerce which ought to unite but now convulses the world...” (Crèvecoeur 37). Not only was Crèvecoeur impressed by Raynal’s theory of a global commerce in the eighteenth century in the wake of European imperialism and colonialism, he was also moved by Raynal’s spirit of humanity: “As an eloquent and powerful advocate, you have pleaded the cause of humanity in espousing that of the poor Africans. You viewed these provinces of North America in their true light: as the asylum of freedom, as the cradle of future nations and the refuge of distressed Europeans” (Crèvecoeur 37). Crèvecoeur felt that there was an atmosphere of “universal benevolence” and “diffusive good will [sic]” behind Raynal’s work. Indeed, he was so convinced that there was “a secret communion among good men throughout the world, a mental affinity connecting them by a similitude of sentiments” that he wished to “be permitted to share in that extensive intellectual consanguinity” (38).

Crèvecoeur’s indebtedness to Enlightenment ideals, specifically to Raynal, is manifest in the dedication,<sup>10</sup> and it is also clear that he is eager to enlist in the cause of the transatlantic circle of men of letters. According to Christine Holbo, Raynal saw commerce as the source of the global, humanitarian sympathies which ground his critique of slavery: “Economically and socially, commerce gave rise to the discoveries of science, to the expansion of sentiment, and to the possibility of universal or philosophical reflection” (31). Unfortunately, in their effort to create margins of profit, merchants, who were the primary agents of this wave of global commerce and maritime explorations, also relied on the exploitation of labor, hence the emergence of slavery in the New World. Therefore, in recognizing “the mercantile imagination both as a source of philosophical knowledge and moral decay,” Holbo goes on to argue, “Raynal explicitly implicated the rise of Enlightened humanism in the enslavement and degradation of a significant portion of mankind” (31).

Holbo demonstrates Raynal’s influence on Crèvecoeur in her essay. Nevertheless, to say that Crèvecoeur uses Raynal’s book as a model for *Letters*, as Holbo also argues, poses some problems. Crèvecoeur may have enthused over the theory of a global commerce, but his model farmer has not. James’s idea of commerce is only realized on what Myra Jehlen calls “a micro-economic level,” that is, on a communal level (“Traveling in America” 143). James the farmer is independent and lives his life, to a great extent, in a self-sufficient way. He couldn’t possibly be interested in international or

<sup>8</sup> Rucker reads James and Crèvecoeur as two opposing consciousnesses: James the incorrigible idealist and moral coward and Crèvecoeur the pessimistic realist.

<sup>9</sup> Raynal’s *L’Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (4 vols., Amsterdam, 1770; English translation, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*) was actually the collaborative work of the *philosophe coteries*, among them Diderot. I follow the common practice and attribute it to Raynal.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of Raynal’s influence on Crèvecoeur, refer to Christine Holbo, 27-32, or Grantland Rice, 102-05.

transatlantic trade or commerce. Furthermore, Raynal's *History* proposed a theory, America's environmental degeneracy, which was later more fully developed by Buffon. According to Buffon, quadrupeds in the New World were much more reduced in stature and diversity than their counterparts in Europe; likewise, the "savages" in the Americas did not have great (sexual) energy. These inferiorities were attributable to the unfavorable climate. Buffon, for example, said: "In the savage, the organs of generation are small and feeble. He has no hair, no beard, no ardour for the female. Though nimbler than the European, because more accustomed to running, his strength is not so great. His sensations are less acute; and yet he is more timid and cowardly. He has no vivacity, no activity of mind."<sup>11</sup> For Buffon, everything degenerated in the Americas. The theory of degeneracy in the Americas was so influential that as late as 1837 Captain Frederick Marryat, English Royal naval commander and novelist, was still persuaded that "the American climate resulted in a deterioration from the physique possessed by the originals of the British settlers" (qtd. in Boehm and Schwartz 453). Even immigrants to the New World suffered deterioration. What would Crèvecoeur have to say about this?

Crèvecoeur never commented directly on the "American degeneracy" theory although Farmer James often suggests that all changes are local, meaning that we are all subject to the influence of local climate and environment. In Letter III, James remarks: "But perhaps that soil would soon alter everything; for our opinions, vices, and virtues, are altogether local: we are machines fashioned by every circumstance around us" (Crèvecoeur 98). James, however, does not entirely subscribe to the climatic determinism. In the same letter he also comments: "Men are like plants. The goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment" (71). Like plants, humans undergo transformation because of the air and the climate. Unlike plants, however, they also transform because of their government, religion, and employment. Indeed, James particularly stresses the fact that European immigrants work hard when they are in the new country because they cultivate their own land, they do not have to pay steep taxes, and they feel reassured that the government and the law will protect them. They are reborn because they are "resurrected" by a new society and a new system: "*He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds" (70; original emphasis). It should be evident that Crèvecoeur does not believe in the degeneracy theory. On the contrary, he believes that the American climate, along with the government, will "regenerate" the immigrants. Crèvecoeur refutes Raynal's (or Buffon's) theory and contributes to the myth that the transplanted Europeans will become a "new race of man" in the New World.

On the other hand, Crèvecoeur does support Raynal's physiocratic beliefs. Physiocrats believe that land and its products are the only true sources of a nation's wealth and that freedom of opportunity and security of person and property are essential to prosperity. Physiocrats like François Quesnay (1694–1774) and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–1781) stressed the value of land agriculture as the only reliable source of a nation's wealth, in contrast to classical economists' emphasis on the ruler's wealth, accumulation of gold, or the balance of trade. In *A Philosophical and Political History* Raynal comments on the relation of commerce and agriculture: "if the lands be not cultivated, all commerce is precarious... nations that are only maritime, or commercial,

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<sup>11</sup> "Buffon's American Degeneracy." The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University. Web. 23 Jan., 2012. <<http://www.ansp.org/museum/jefferson/otherPages/degeneracy-1.php>>.

enjoy, it is true, the fruits of commerce; but the tree of it belongs to those who cultivate it. Agriculture is, therefore, the first and real opulence of a state” (qtd. in Rice 104). Farmer James endorses a similar belief: “by riches I do not mean gold and silver—we have but little of those metals; I mean a better sort of wealth—cleared lands, cattle, good houses, good clothes, and an increase of people to enjoy them” (Crèvecoeur 80). Furthermore, James believes the land to be more than the source of wealth: “Those who inhabit the middle settlements [i.e. New York and Pennsylvania], by far the most numerous, must be very different; the simple cultivation of the earth *purifies* them, but the indulgences of the government, the soft remonstrances of religion, the rank of independent freeholders, must necessarily inspire them with sentiments, very little known in Europe among a people of the same class” (71; my emphasis). James believes that the land or the cultivation of it purifies the farmer. Nevertheless, the purification does not derive from the land only, because farmers in Europe do not experience the same transformation. The transformation is also attributable to the new government, the new system of religion, and the rank of the freeholder. It is a singular American experience: “The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions” (70.) Instead of suffering deterioration, the transplanted European becomes a “new man.” Crèvecoeur shares Raynal’s beliefs, but he also challenges them. In revising Raynal’s or other Enlightenment intelligentsia’s degeneracy theory, *Letters* contributes to American exceptionalism and becomes a foundational text of early American literature. In advocating the concept of the (freehold) farmer, however, new controversies arise.

### **The (Freehold) Farmer as a Problematic Figure**

*Letters* abounds in controversies. In this part of my paper, I would like to discuss the following issues: the concept of the freehold farmer in relation to the issues of gender, race/ethnicity, and class. As Mary E. Rucker observes, Crèvecoeur’s “perfect society” is predicated upon several Enlightenment doctrines: the ideal value of an agrarian democracy located midway between unhandseled nature and civilization; the validity of an economic system based on the pursuit of self-interest; the responsibility of government to ensure the general welfare; the deterministic force of physical and social environments; and the order, intelligibility, and benevolence of the universe (193). One important belief missing from Rucker’s list is the notion of the freehold farmer. The freeholder originally designated the owner of an estate held in free tenure, who possessed, under the Magna Carta, the rights of a free man. Transported to the American soil by the English settlers, freehold tenure gradually took on a different significance, especially in the Revolutionary or early national period. In his essay on this subject, Chester E. Eisinger uses the term “the freehold concept” to refer to the body of ideas which make up the “Jeffersonian myth.” According to Eisinger, this concept is an ideological construct comprised of three propositions which have been extracted from the writings of eighteenth-century authors, especially Thomas Jefferson, who concerned themselves with the issues of the farmer and the land. The propositions are: (a) that every man has a natural right to the land; (b) that through ownership of the land the individual achieves status and self-fulfillment; and (c) that the good political society must provide for the uninhibited development of the farmer (44). What is particularly relevant to the discussion here is the second proposition. A propertied farmer is an independent farmer; he is, to a large extent, self-reliant and self-sufficient. In addition, a farmer acquires fine character because of his intimate contact with nature and steady personal habits which are conducive to the highest kind of morality (44). For Jefferson, the farmer represents the typical American citizen and the epitome of democracy. Therefore, Eisinger states: “When Crèvecoeur and others

transmogrified the struggle for existence into an idyll... the farmer became the symbol for all Americans" (47). "Political democracy and the economic opportunities of the frontier," Eisinger goes on to argue, "make the freehold concept uniquely American" (53). In the Jeffersonian myth, the purified, morally superior farmer will also be the staunch champion of political democracy. Yet the notion of the freehold farmer is excessively idealized; if it is put to tests, it will most likely fail. In Crèvecoeur's case, his yeoman conforms to literary agrarians' notion of the farmer in many respects, but Farmer James falls far short of being a defender of political democracy upon scrutiny.

Farmer James, like his creator Crèvecoeur the colonial American, is a loyal British subject. In *Letters*, James repeatedly sings hymns to the home country. People in the colonies are "united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws without dreading their power, because they are equitable" (Crèvecoeur 67). In Letter II, he offers effusive thanks to his new situation: "... and where is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us? I owe nothing but a peppercorn to my country, a small tribute to my king, with loyalty and due respect..." (Crèvecoeur 52). In fact, what James has paid to the king is much more than a peppercorn and respect. After the Seven Years' War (or the French and Indian War on the North American scene), the British government desperately needed to replenish its coffers. Even before the War, the Navigation Acts and the Molasses Act had already begot discontent in the colonies. After the War, more taxes were imposed: the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767). James's peppercorn served only to tease the British government's financial hunger.

James's idea of government is one in which "with all this apparatus of law, its coercive powers are seldom wanted" (Crèvecoeur 124). The following passage may further explain what he means. In his description of Nantucket in Letter IV, he mentions that the Friends (the Quakers) comprise two-thirds of the magistracy; they are, therefore, proprietors of this territory. He describes the existence of the magistracy in completely negative terms:

Seldom is it that any individual is amerced or punished; their jail conveys no terror; no man has lost his life here judicially since the foundation of this town, which is upwards of a hundred years. Solemn tribunals, public executions, humiliating punishments, are altogether unknown. I saw neither governors nor any pageantry of state, neither ostentatious magistrates nor any individual clothed with useless dignity... no soldiers are appointed to bayonet their compatriots into servile compliance. (125)

"The positive advantages of such governance," as Myra Jehlen argues, "are all negative, and Crèvecoeur would rather have done without it altogether" ("Monarcho-Anarchist" 218). Even the law seems to exist in the abstract: "The simplicity of their manners shortens the catalogues of their wants; the law, at a distance, is ever ready to exert itself in the protection of those who stand in need of its assistance" (Crèvecoeur 125). "At a distance," Jehlen maintains, "is the key to his [James's] outlook" ("Monarcho-Anarchist" 218). "The law at a distance" reminds us that the British government, the real ruler of the colonies and Nantucket, is several thousand miles away. When James elaborates on how "Europeans become Americans" in Letter III, he describes the process in detail and then concludes: "What an epocha [sic] in this man's life! He is become a freeholder, from perhaps a German boor. He is now an American, a Pennsylvanian, an English subject" (83). At that moment, there is no dilemma to face between being an American and being an English subject. But when that government, several thousand miles away, flexes its muscles and imposes its authority, the farmer's "freedom of actions" and "freedom of

thoughts” vanish. James’s political democracy leads him to pursue individualism and egalitarianism, but not the exercise of political will in the congressional hall (Jehlen, “Traveling in America” 143). In the end, he loses all. When he attempts to flee into Indian country, he practically abandons his American identity. In the case of Crèvecoeur, he became neither an American nor an Englishman when he left the colonies. When he came back to the U.S. after the Revolution, he returned as a French citizen and diplomat.

Farmer James is not Jefferson’s faithful defender of American democracy; nor is he a typical or representative American. For one thing, he is too masculine.<sup>12</sup> D. H. Lawrence was probably the first to point this out: “This American Farmer tells of the joys of creating a home in the wilderness, and of cultivating the virgin soil. Poor virgin, prostituted from the very start” (29). Annette Kolodny also comments on the metaphor of the land as woman: “Implicit in the metaphor of the land-as-woman was both the regressive pull of maternal containment *and* the seductive invitation to sexual assertion: if the Mother demands passivity, and threatens regression, the Virgin apparently invites sexual assertion and awaits impregnation” (67; original emphasis). Crèvecoeur’s image of the farmer is problematic here. He is not just a simple cultivator; he also plays the masculine conqueror, while simultaneously dreading the regressive pull of the maternal. The farmer entertains an ambivalent attitude toward women and the land he cultivates.

Readers of *Letters* are most impressed by Crèvecoeur’s melting-pot theory: “What, then, is the American, this new man? He is either an European or the descendent of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (Crèvecoeur 69-70). For James, the New World is a country for everyone: “We know, properly speaking, no strangers; his [country] is every person’s country; the variety of our soils, situations, climates, governments, and produce hath something which must please everybody” (80). In passage after passage James celebrates equal opportunity and treatment for everyone. Beneath the surface of egalitarianism, however, runs a disturbing undercurrent. James’s definition of Americanness is exclusive. The representative American must be “either an European or the descendent of an European.” With a single stroke of the pen, James writes African Americans and Native Americans out of American citizenship. James sometimes thinks the “Indians” lead a nobler life than the Europeans: “they are in many instances superior to us” (215); yet, in his description of Nantucket they appear to him “to be a race doomed to recede and disappear before the superior genius of the Europeans” (122). When he considers fleeing to the Indians, he is apprehensive that his children might be “perfectly Indianized.” He shudders at the mere thought of their possible intermarriage: “for however I respect the simple, the inoffensive society of these people in their villages, the strongest prejudices would make me abhor any alliance with them in blood, disagreeable no doubt to Nature’s intentions” (222). He considers “negroes” faithful and hard-working servants, yet he never entertains the idea of ranking them as citizens. Even European descendents are hierarchized. James holds the “unmixed descendents of Englishmen” in the highest esteem. Although he considers “promiscuity” the distinctive characteristic of the American, he prefers the descendents of the Englishmen to remain unmixed: “I have heard many wish that they [descendents of the Englishmen] had been more intermixed also; for my part, I am no wisher and think it much better as it has happened” (68). He believes these unmixed descendents of the Englishmen deserve to be recognized: “There never was a people, situated as they are, who with so ungrateful a soil [New England]

<sup>12</sup> For a different reading on Farmer James’s masculinity, see Anne Myles, “Elegiac Patriarchs.” Myles argues that in attempting to enlist sympathy for James in Letter XII, “Distresses of a Frontier Man,” Crèvecoeur deploys “the feminized representation of loyalists in Revolutionary discourse” (151).

have done more in so short a time" (68). Next in the hierarchy comes the German: "How much wiser, in general, the honest Germans than almost all other Europeans" (84). The Scotch and the Irish are at the heels of the German: "Whence the difference arises I know not, but out of twelve families of emigrants of each country, generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine German, and four Irish" (85). His flat denial notwithstanding, the farmer does show his "partiality." In the end, however, it is still slavery that is most disturbing to modern-day readers. In the "caged slave" scene, he is unable to do anything for the slave because, he claims, he forgets to load his gun and thus cannot end the slave's misery with one bullet. The real reason, one might suspect, is probably that he is afraid to offend his host if he takes the slave's life. Even though he is conscience-stricken, he still attends the host's dinner. He remains elusive about how many slaves he owns, and he justifies his ownership of slaves by assuring us that he feeds and treats them well. As Grantland Rice observes, Raynal condemns the introduction and persistence of slavery "as the harbinger of the fall of the New World, evidence that the corruption of Europe had indeed undermined the ideal of an agrarian asylum" (105). James pledges to be a "new man," to "leav[e] behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners," but the corruption of Europe has insidiously caught up with him in the form of racial/ethnic discrimination.

A. W. Plumstead asserts: "*Letters* is a very class-conscious book" (215). What Plumstead means is that although the book is dedicated to the European upper class (Abbè Raynal, Mr. F. B.), it is "really written for, and identifies with, the lower classes, the downtrodden of the world" (215). Plumstead may be right, but the truth is not so simple. James claims that the Americans are a people of cultivators: "Lawyer or merchant are the fairest titles our towns afford; that of a farmer is the only appellation of the rural inhabitants of our country" (Crèvecoeur 67). The New World seems to be a classless society, and everyone stands on an equal footing with one another. This is far from the truth. James's hatred of lawyers is well documented.<sup>13</sup> He registers his hostility toward them almost every time he mentions them. He distrusts merchants because they are unscrupulous when they try to turn a profit. For him hunters "appear to be no better than carnivorous animals" (Crèvecoeur 52). They are "a mongrel breed, half civilized, half savage" (52), and hunting is "but a licentious idle life" (53). The farmer is the only one worthy of respect. By "farmer," however, James seems to mean the freehold farmer, the one who owns his own property and can pass it on to his posterity. In his essay on eighteenth-century ideologies of farming, Timothy Sweet reminds us that one of the most easily overlooked facts about agriculture is its "class structure." After discussing several eighteenth-century agricultural or agrarian writers, including Thomas Jefferson, Sweet comments: "The writers discussed so far note a distinction between large and small landowner. Yet for the most part they tend to minimize the importance of this distinction and to elide tenancy and wage laboring, containing all farmers in a single category, the 'yeoman' or 'freeholder' who is made to represent all Americans" (67). Sweet explains that although tenant farmers and wage laborers were an integral part of eighteenth-century agriculture, they tended to be forgotten. This is what James (or Crèvecoeur) has been doing. There are also back-settlers who clear the path for the settlers who come after them. James talks about the back-settlers in a disdainful way: "In all societies there are off-casts; this impure part serves as our precursors or pioneers.... Forty years ago, this smiling country was thus inhabited; it is now purged, a general decency of manners prevails throughout, and such has been the fate of our best countries" (73). He refers to them in another passage: "Thus are our first steps trodden, thus are our first trees felled, in general by the most vicious of our people; and thus the path is opened for the arrival of a second

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, David Carlson, "Farmer versus Lawyer: Crèvecoeur's *Letters* and the Liberal Subject."

and better class, the true American freeholders, the most respectable set of people in this part of the world..." (79). The back settlers only serve the purpose of opening the path for the arrival of a better class, the true American freeholders. Once that purpose is attained, this "impure part" of society should be cast off. Thus, the cultivators, as Kolodny contends, "exist only as the end of a process that begins with foresters, hunters, traders, and that whole class of frontier society he [James] accuses of 'shocking violation'" (59). James shows little gratitude or respect for those pioneers and what they have done. Therefore, Timothy Sweet argues that for James, the immigrant counts "only insofar as he becomes a freeholder" (65). "Connecting the idea of liberty with exclusive property rights," David Carlson maintains, "is a hallmark of eighteenth-century English legal thought, of Lockean political theory, and of a wide range of literary representation of the freeholder" ("Farmer versus Lawyer 261). Nevertheless, controversies arise when the freehold farmer is touted as the representative American at the expense of other farmers or people of other walks of life. Crèvecoeur's idealization of the (freehold) farmer problematizes or delimits the concept of Americanness. Besides, James's farmer is, with almost no exception, a white, male European descendant.

James himself does not have to climb the social ladder of a tenant farmer or wage laborer because his father left him three hundred and seventy-one acres of land, an excellent orchard, a good house, and a substantial barn. James is industrious, no doubt, but his father, a former back-settler, left him "no kind of difficulties to struggle with." Besides, he has negroes to work for him, and they usually attend to the hardest work. Therefore, James can well afford to be a gentleman farmer as well as a "scribbling farmer," as he calls himself. What about Crèvecoeur himself? Jennifer Rae Greeson recently discovered a watercolor by Crèvecoeur. The watercolor, painted sometime between 1773 and 1775, showed Crèvecoeur's earlier representation of American life, in which he depicted himself "not as a yeoman farmer, but rather, unmistakably, as a conventional planter" (106). Crèvecoeur organized the painting "around two central figures counterpoised in an allegory of New World agricultural enterprise: a white, two-story, big house, embellished with wings and portico, hovering above a lone black man at work at his plow in the foreground" (106). Crèvecoeur included himself as master of the contents of the painting: dressed in hat and coat, he stood under shady trees, his wife seated at his side, supervising the negro's work in leisure. Greeson therefore concludes that "the political independence of the U.S. necessitated the invention of 'the American, this new man,' rather than the other way around" (106). In other words, feeling in 1782 that the independence of the thirteen colonies could become an actuality (the Treaty of Paris in 1783 ended the American Revolution), Crèvecoeur might have rewritten the first three sketches extensively to anticipate the birth of the new nation and invented the narrator Farmer James, converting him into a representative of the republic new man. Whether Greeson's argument is conclusive enough, *Letters* does teem with passages which contradict each other and contest Father James's credential as a representative American. Crèvecoeur's painstaking efforts notwithstanding, the colonial planter still lurks behind the republic new man. Controversies throughout *Letters* attest to the residues of Crèvecoeur's colonial past.

## Conclusion

*Letters* is replete with controversies and contradictions. Crèvecoeur himself is probably the source of such contradictions, the controversial man "of many masks" and

“of multiple identities” (Chevignard 176).<sup>14</sup> As Susan Manning observes, Crèvecoeur was “an American by adoption and law, and a Frenchman by birth; an Englishman by emotional allegiances” (xiii). From Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur to J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, this Franco-American (or “Normano-Americanus,” as he once described himself) changed his names several times. He was even adopted by the Oneida Indians and had an Indian name—Cahioharra (Damrosch 89). The name of the first English edition's author—Hector St. John—sounded like a gentleman of English stock, and contemporary readers of the book mistook him for an Anglo-American. Without knowing who he was, Benjamin Franklin defended this Hector St. John when someone accused him of being neither an American nor a farmer. After he returned to France and resumed his French citizenship, he once wrote to Franklin—then American ambassador in France—in his former French name. Franklin answered him in these terms: “Madame la Comtesse d'Houdetot had warmly recommended to me a M. Crèvecoeur who had been long in America. Please inform me if you are the same person” (qtd. in Allen and Asselineau 90). Crèvecoeur had to make up excuses to convince Franklin of his own identity: Hector St. John as well as Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur. He created confusing identities and conflicting allegiances to the extent that he probably lost himself among them. It is this same Crèvecoeur who attempted to create Farmer James as a simple fellow, a Lockean “*tabula rasa*,” who exclaims: “But, believe me, what I write is all true and real” (Crèvecoeur 62). His friend Brissot de Warville described this man with a mysterious past: “Crèvecoeur always had a gloomy countenance and unquiet air ... His conduct before the Revolution wasn't the only thing that Crèvecoeur wanted to hide; he had had domestic sorrows that he enveloped under an impenetrable veil” (qtd. in Damrosch 92). Crèvecoeur's biographers say that he “wanted to turn his back on his past and become a true American” (Allen and Asselineau 75), but his European and colonial past lingers and haunts him.

One other source of the ideological conflicts is Crèvecoeur's influence by Enlightenment doctrines. Enlightenment intellectuals, especially the French *philosophes*, provided Crèvecoeur with a whole array of ideals to imagine a new society on the new soil. Taking his cue especially from the physiocrats, Crèvecoeur invented Farmer James and established him “as one of the nation's most potent and seductive cultural archetypes” (Carlson, “Farmer versus Lawyer” 258). Unfortunately, Enlightenment ideals got bogged down in European colonial practices, such as slavery or caste systems, as Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History* could testify. Norman S. Grabo suggests that Crèvecoeur “leaped boldly into an international republic of enlightened letters” (160). Nevertheless, the age of Enlightenment was also the age of European imperialism and colonialism. Crèvecoeur's European past finally dragged him back to the earth. Reading *Letters* transatlantically allows us to see the Americanness of Farmer James as well as his Europeaness. We see in him the American Farmer, “the new man,” as well as the old colonial planter. Crèvecoeur forges a new language for readers to imagine a new world, but even this new language is already loaded with controversies and contradictions.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Cunliffe's long discussion of Crèvecoeur's character, 135-39.

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