Novels before Nations:
How Early US Novels Imagined Community

Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse
Duke University

In this essay, we propose an alternative to the mainstream of novel criticism, which links the novel to the modern nation—whether as a symptom of the nation's emergence, as the means of producing subjects to inhabit it, or as a representation of the nation that makes that nation seem necessary to the existence of its population. To accomplish this objective, we identify the narrative moves by which novels of the early US republic, roughly the period from 1780 to 1830, brought intelligibility to what in European terms was most certainly a mess—namely, the colonies of North America. Working together, these operations constitute a model of biopolitics before *biopolitics*, as we have come to understand the term in the last two or three decades through Michel Foucault: a set of policies for managing groups of human beings, aligned with and complementary to the disciplinary institutions that manage the body by producing individualizing effects. If we can assume that the novel is one of those disciplinary institutions that produce such individualizing effects, then we must also assume that novels train readers to imagine community in terms that are responsive to the organization of the liberal state. But what happens to that form and the kind of community that they ask us to imagine when novels do not aim at producing these individualizing effects?

Going strictly by the novels produced in the United States during the period of the early republic, one has to conclude either that this substantial body of fiction simply abandoned the standard set by other national novels, specifically those published in England, or that the new United States was not a nation in the sense that later novels would insist it was and so could not be imagined as a cohesive aggregate of rights-bearing individuals.[1] We hold both conclusions to be true.

To make this argument, we accept Benedict Anderson's influential hypothesis that novel and nation emerge together, the former as both facilitating and reacting

to the latter. Like Anderson, too, we are less than satisfied with previous explanations of the near simultaneous appearance of novel and nation and what the one had to do with the other.[2] Nor do we have major quarrels with Anderson's definition of a nation as "an imagined political community—imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). As he goes on to describe the formal characteristics of such an "imagined community," however, and to elaborate the narrative maneuvers by which it hails readers into a modern nation-space, Anderson's model community comes to resemble the notion of "the people" (99) that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri rightly criticize for being an idealized and unitary figure that misrepresents the heterogeneity that actually characterizes a population.[3] So long as we think of the forms of community—people and multitude—as discrepant in this respect, we cannot quarrel with Anderson's claim that the novel's imagined community is one that synchronizes social information to produce a temporality much like Benjamin's "homogeneous, empty time" (Anderson 24), as well as the temporality that E.P.

354 Thompson calls "work-discipline" (56). Caught in the epic sweep of all the novels that back up Anderson's claim, we see how they use a classification system of representative characters to make variant local details intelligible to a wide range of readers.

In view of Anderson's stunning examples and the ethnographic sensitivity with which he presents them, why would anyone want to challenge his claim that these formal principles accomplished two such substantial political feats? For Anderson, novels not only created the illusion of temporal coincidence among their multiple plots, but, in so doing, they also made it possible for individuals who never encountered one another to imagine belonging to the same community. To think of themselves as part of such a readership, as Anderson insists, these readers simply had to share certain forms of information published in the print vernacular. As such a form, the novel provided "the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (25). Here, however, our account of the novels of the early republic leads us to take issue with Anderson's argument that novels imagine populations as nations unified to the degree he suggests.

Before the novels that would eventually compose a national tradition persuaded readers to imagine community as a horizontally affiliated body of people who inhabited a single temporal-spatial order, novels produced in the former British colonies persuaded readers to imagine themselves as part of a very different form of social organization. Coming before the novels that Anderson links to nation-making, we argue, the first US novels enabled readers to imagine their world as an alternative to the European fantasy of an America ripe for appropriation as property. Lacking both the boundaries and the sovereignty that Anderson ascribes to nationhood, the community experienced in British America was probably much more like a stateless people. Focusing on this supposedly anomalous body of early American fiction, we looked in vain for temporally synchronized plots, representative characters, and a perspective driven by the imperative to become an individual. In the face of the sheer amount and consistency of evidence to the contrary, we could not dismiss these

novels as substandard, incoherent, or even peripheral simply because they failed to materialize the kind of community considered testimony to the nation's existence.

In order to explain the community that the novels of the early US Republic do ask their readers to imagine, we settled on five concepts, tropes, or aspects of fiction—call them what you will. These terms emerge from the novels themselves as they reverse the narrative moves that would organize experience around the individual accumulation of personal and material property. Identifying the components of this alternative model, we will also suggest that it does not vanish with the novels of James Fenimore Cooper but persists into the so-called American Renaissance. Using our terms to read these novels will expose a dynamic and potentially boundless network of radically horizontal relations at work in novels that do belong to the national tradition. If we recognize social networks as an alternative way of imagining social relations, we cannot ignore the fact that a similar model of community is at work in contemporary novels across the Anglophone world. The resemblance between the pre-national American novel and contemporary global novels that endeavor to imagine life after the nation is so remarkable that we are tempted to see the two bodies of fiction as bookending the two hundred years of national novels that separate them. If, as we argue in the first half of this essay, novels could not make the experience of early America intelligible as a limited and sovereign people, then it would seem likely that novels today face similar difficulties under conditions of global capitalism.

I. The Conditions of Intelligibility in Colonial America

In addition to the body of fiction that provides our subject matter and analytic, there are other indications that, during the late eighteenth century, landed wealth was losing pride of place as the measure of human value. To explain the geopolitical transformations that were happening even as they wrote, such spokesmen of the age as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Immanuel Kant, and Jeremy Bentham had to deal with the threat posed by a marked increase in international commerce. Thus, paradoxically, at the moment of modern nation-building it became increasingly difficult to think of the nation as an enclosed space. Land was subject to speculation.[4] Where it had once provided a foothold in an organic past for the modern individual, property was on the move and undergoing uncharted substitutions as it crossed borders and passed into other hands. Charlotte Sussman's work on British migration shows that the same held true for whole groups of people during this period. These changes in the way people thought about land were compounded by the fact that they took place on or around the vast expanse of the Atlantic Rim (for such a perspective, see Cohen).

According to Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the nascent logic of political economy made the late seventeenth and eighteenth-century world seem less rather

than more intelligible. He puts the problem of intelligibility this way: "The economic world is naturally opaque and naturally non-totalizable. It is originally and definitely constituted from a multiplicity of points of view" (Foucault 282). As he tells the story, the incoherence of this economic discourse was countered by the informal articulation of an impulse to stay home and take care of one another—to be so grounded even when it was far more profitable to do otherwise. Foucault sees the concept of civil society as the expression of this counter-impulse. The early American novel did not organize itself by means of the contrary impulses that Foucault identifies with liberalism. The first American novels imagine community before this split opened up and the contradiction we call liberalism became the accepted means of holding it together; before, that is, Cooper, Hawthorne, and a number of now canonical authors sliced and diced and parceled off as property the dynamic network formed by trade, migration, transient familial relations, and territorial disputes. In this section of the essay we will set the stage for recovering that earlier model of community by explaining two conditions that a novel had to meet in order to make sense of the American experience to readers on the western side of the Atlantic; in the second section, we will sketch the narrative operations by which the novels of the early republic met those conditions.

Condition 1: That Property is Fundamentally Antisocial

Clearly intent on being recognized and read as novels, early American novels characteristically begin by offering us the material that would go into making a personal world of experience that looks something like John Locke's little commonwealth.[5] According to this model of human life, an individual comes into his own as an individual as he mixes his labor with available resources and converts them into his personal and material property. The early novel breaks up this narrative and reorganizes its material according to a principle that forecloses exactly the formal possibilities that Locke had envisioned—a bounded piece of land, a well-fortified home, and an individual who is sovereign over all it contains. Why is eliminating this possibility a necessary condition for imagining community? Roberto Esposito provides an explanation for the apparent contradiction that property is the very negation of community.

If we think of "*communitas*" as that "relation, which in binding its members to an obligation of reciprocal donation, jeopardizes individual identity," then, writes Esposito, we have to understand "*immunitas*" (or self-removal) as a "defense against the expropriating features of *communitas*." Property affords an immunity that spares the individual contact with people who are constantly exposed to risk. In keeping these people out, property initially "restores borders that were jeopardized by the common" (Esposito 50).[6] Thus, for Esposito, the means by which one removes

himself from the community is also the method by which he defines himself as an individual. To acquire human identity in this way, one has to wrap his or her sense of self around two paradoxes.

First of all, to define one's life as one's own property is to understand oneself in terms of what one is not. To avoid the social position that his father had in mind for him and to become his own man, so to speak, Robinson Crusoe had to flee all human society, not just family but traders, ship captains, and fellow seafarers as well. Defoe engineered a sequence of such removals as the means of creating a protagonist capable of claiming his labor as his own, and on this basis, Crusoe became the self-made individual that his name would signify thereafter. Having removed himself from any semblance of community, Crusoe devotes himself body and soul to maintaining the body that labors on behalf of its own well-being. As Esposito says of Locke's equation of self-removal with self-fulfillment: "Life and property, being and having, person and thing are pressed up together in a mutual relation that makes of either one both the content and the container of the other" (Esposito 64). Seen in this light, the logic of property translates readily into the formal characteristics that Georg Lukács ascribes to the novel's "inner form," that is, the "individuality of a living being," the process of "the individual journeying toward himself" (80). Here, Lukács refers to the process by which a traditional protagonist acquires psychological roundness, as he removes certain things and people from the flux of history and encloses them within his sovereign purview.

From this follows a second paradox: when naturalized and circulated in the novel form, the concept of self as self-removal transformed the notion of freedom from a positive right, or "freedom for," to a negative right, as in "freedom from" encroachments on one's right to maintain and increase oneself through property (Esposito 71-73). What are Austen's heroines but Crusoes of the manor house, earning themselves a place in feminist historiography by claiming an unprecedented right to say no? Here, modern liberty emerges as "that which insures the individual against the interference of others through voluntary subordination to a more powerful order that guarantees it" (Esposito 72). Austen's heroines willingly accept the hands of men whom they have willfully rejected. They are free, in other words, only to define themselves by hesitations and minor deviations in a process that ensures their reproductive suitability.

Rather than individuals somewhat at odds with themselves and thus not only rounded and self-enclosed but also more alike than different from one another, the early American novel favors flat and discontinuous characters from a wide range of types. Such characters can combine and recombine with others, each altering his or her possibilities for becoming someone in the process. A narrative that behaves in this way will never yield a consistent protagonist. This holds as true for *The Algerine Captive*, a novel in the tradition of the Barbary captivity narrative, and Brocken Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*, a disjointed *Bildungsroman*, as it does for Hannah Webster's *The Coquette*, a seduction novel. When we focus on the links between inconstant

characters, we find that a pattern nonetheless repeats itself from novel to novel. A broken home, an infusion of strangers, seduced daughters, and wayward sons—such routine failures of traditional kinship relationships eliminate all possibility of self-enclosure and continuity over generations. Out of the human debris of traditional society, these devices produce a dynamic network both immanent in, and resistant to, pathways that map the political-economic force field.

Condition 2: That Existence Depends on Connecting

Something happens in the early American novel to make the narrative double back on itself and de-ontologize the content that might otherwise cohere around a character to produce the basic unit of society we call an individual. In de-ontologizing property, however, the early American novel also ontologizes some quality or feature of that character—a name like Molineux, a profession, a flirtatious disposition, often just sheer gullibility. These provide the protocols for articulating what at first seem random parts as elements of a common or popular social body. This event relocates the semiotic basis of community from separate modules of property to the connective tissue that frees a character from himself so that he can combine and recombine with a much wider range of character types than one finds, say, at some country dance or in the Pump Room at Bath in an Austen novel. To say that a new form of community comes into being with this change in its material content is both to understate and to overstress the importance of the novel's biopolitical turn against property.

On the one hand, the emergence of a social network would seem to insist that a social principle independent and more basic than property organizes life itself. On the other hand, by downplaying the fact that the new social principle depends on money and love in order to destroy property, we perhaps exaggerate the power inherent solely in that principle to make connections among such a diverse field of types. But we would certainly be underestimating the part the social principle plays in forming the early American novel were we to overlook the *irreversibility* of its effect. Thus, we opt for overstating the importance of that principle. The American novel refuses to reinstate property as the basis of identity: it will not allow a new household to replace an old one, and a protagonist to earn a place of pride within it, in contrast, say, to Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. In this way, the novels we have in mind turn themselves into an ongoing experiment in social connectivity. If neither money nor love, they force us to ask, then what does make social connections? These novels stop just short of saying that narrative itself exercised this form of social agency for the diverse readers of the early republic, provided that the novel could persuade those readers to locate themselves within the network that was forming.

Despite what may seem the newness of the network form, key features of that model also correspond to what can be considered the earliness of early American

fiction. Contrary to the argument of Benedict Anderson, Trish Loughran's account of print culture in the age of US nation-building contends "there was no 'nationalized' print sphere in the years just before and just after the Revolution, but rather a proliferating variety of local and regional reading publics scattered across a vast and diverse geographical space" (xix). Loughran attributes the failure of local American communities to form horizontal relationships with one another to a failure of infrastructure: "the absence of roads and canals to carry goods into the western interior, up to the Canadian border, and throughout most of the South" meant that "newspapers, novels, plays, and pamphlets" had only the most limited means of domestic circulation (20). Until the 1830s, these publications were more likely to make it to England from Philadelphia than to the American South or Western Territory. Loughran sees the success of the US Constitution as that of "a printed fiction to create a veneer of official consensus" (20). It took considerable rhetorical skill to bring a "dispersion of its parts, their generative dislocation out of actual face-to-face ties, into the elusive realm of the (early) national" (26).

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Loughran's evidence leaves little doubt that the early American readership was a patchwork affair of different localities, each largely enjoying its own works of fiction. We take issue only with Loughran's assumption that to do their work, novels, like constitutions, must create a character capable of subsuming local differences and in this way "represent" a broader and more heterogeneous readership. The proliferation of network novels during this period suggests that, by contrast, the novel emerged in the new US because it called attention to the dispersion of incompatible parts and created random, often unsettling, connections between them that did not suppress irreconcilable differences. In reading a number of these novels, one consequently finds a network not only emerging within a given novel but also repeating itself outside that novel—as other novelists use network protocols to reorganize a narrative that might otherwise have taken a biographical form.

II. Aspects of Early American Fiction

In this section, we propose a set of conceptual tropes, narrative moves, or aspects of fiction that indicate how these novels made the American experience intelligible as that web of social relations we call a network. In creating this web, the novels we examine also tried out various ways of maximizing human life—not of producing a representative individual.

Aspect 1: Dispersal

Dispersal is the first of the five aspects we identify because it is the first move by which the novel countered Locke's ebullient assertion that America offered ideal conditions

for imagining a world turned endlessly into property. The term *dispersal* describes a way of forming social relations that works against the qualities of continuity, unity, and fixity necessary to materialize the idea of the person as property. As it advances at the cost of one household after another, the story of Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn similarly asks us to abandon the concept of a personal "journey" or group "diaspora" in favor of the concept of "dispersal."[7] Mervyn is so often stripped of his most salient features that his character becomes a makeshift affair of abandoned clothing, names, and women, as well as the positions to which they were attached. No matter how inclined this protagonist may be to make these things his own, he is incapable of hanging onto them long enough to substantiate an identity. His Teflon coating consequently makes Mervyn available for others to appropriate and mold to their purposes.

Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* offers an explanation of the thinking that underlies the protagonist who repeatedly falls apart. In the course of Book I, Lee suffers a heart attack digging for buried treasure and falls into the pit. As he does so, he also "falls into a trance," from which he awakens only "to be riveted to the earth with astonishment" on seeing before him "the dead body of a man." Astonishment turns to "horror" as Lee sees that the body bears "*my* face, *my* figure, and [is] dressed in *my* clothes" (Bird 48). When that body mysteriously vanishes, Sheppard Lee is left with a disembodied voice and no story to tell. Its plot suspended, narration nonetheless proceeds. In direct violation of the idea that one's body is the first thing that one owns and the basis of extended ownership, Lee quickly helps himself to the body of Squire Higginson, lying on the ground nearby and reasons thus: "Why might I not, that is to say, my spirit [...] take possession of a tenement which there remained no spirit to claim, and thus, uniting interests together, as two feeble factions unite in the political world, become a body possessing life, strength, and usefulness?" (58). Making use of Higginson's body, Lee becomes Squire Higginson, but the protagonist of Byrd's novel is Lee, not Higginson. Why is this so, if not because Lee rather than Higginson continues to become entirely different people as the opportunity presents itself?

Aspect 2: Population

Protagonists for whom such plasticity is their salient characteristic tend to leave a path of wreckage—old selves, old relationships, old households—behind them as they encounter new ones. The loss of individual coherence at the level of plot usually reverberates at the level of narration, forcing the narrator to break up and continue the story from a very different vantage point. Published in 1782, *Letters From an American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur is perhaps somewhat off the beaten path for a study of the early American novel (for accounts of *Letters* as a novel, see Rice 99-124 and Larkin). The 1783 edition in English has been read so widely and fits our model of the early American novel so neatly, however, that we use it to explain

why narration breaks down in the novels at hand and what it takes to restore intelligibility once this happens. In an early letter, Crèvecœur's fictional letter writer rolls out his Lockean credentials, beginning with an account of how his father transformed American soil into a farm on which "in return [...] is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district" (54). Then, in the opening of his final letter, Farmer James ceases to write as that individual and understands himself instead as part of a "convulsed and half dissolved" society that recalls both Hobbes's headless multitude and the demonic population of Milton's Hell. No longer set apart from other people as his own property, Farmer James speaks as a population "seized with a fever of the mind, transported beyond the calmness which is necessary to delineate our thoughts" (Crèvecœur 201).

Fast forwarding seventy years to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we find the author abandoning her narrator and placing herself within the distressed community whose vicissitudes she has been describing. This move from outside to inside instantly redefines the local misery created by treating people as property into a problem of far greater magnitude. There is no longer any outside (or historical context) for the work of fiction, as the narrator, now author, places herself within the afflicted population that has taken over what Lukács called "the inner form" of the novel: "A mighty revolution is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake [....] Every nation that carries in its bosom great and unredressed injustice has in itself the element of this last convulsion" (Stowe 629).

Aspect 3: Conversion

We settled on the term *conversion* as the most suggestive way of conceptualizing the events that transform individuals into such a population. We see this transformation as a cluster of small narrative moves that, in combination, nullify the principle of contractual exchange binding individuals to their property, so that social relations can proceed on an entirely different basis. Essential to this event is an intensification of the energy that wells up from a source within the protagonist and instantaneously connects him to all those within reach.[8] This force transforms many small forms of resistance into that of a single convulsing body that acquires power only as individuals—from Farmer James to Harriet Beecher Stowe—relinquish self-sovereignty and accede to its needs and demands.

This paradox unfolds perhaps most clearly in the religious experience of conversion, where individuals temporarily shed certain features of their mortal identity in order to join an elite spiritual community (see Segal 150-83 and Stout 202-03). Like the popular festivals that serve Bahktin as models of the carnivalesque, each repetition of the conversion ritual transforms the very substance of those who undergo it in a manner that unifies and renews the corporate body.[9] In the early American novel, however, conversion works in exactly the opposite direction—from the meta-

physics of election to the biopolitics of a population. The conversion effect extends beyond categories of class or status to include and equalize virtually everyone who gives him or herself over to it. By naturalizing the event through which they define themselves as American novels, the novels of the early republic use conversion simultaneously to rob the novel form of its organic past and to disable the reversibility that characterized Bakhtin's inverted social world and leveled hierarchy. So, for instance, Stowe's polemical conclusion overturns the sentimental appeal of the novel itself that beatifies Uncle Tom, forcing readers to think of slavery as a disease that afflicts an all encompassing social body. The novel offers no immunity to this disease.

What makes the conversion effect irreversible? Or, put in Bakhtinian terms, what enables popular energy to burst the framework of festival and transform the sovereign power that formerly authorized these contained, performative inversions? An entirely different concept of human life must emerge within the performative framework; it must exceed the limits of the novel's inner form and reverse its relation to **362** the tradition it was engaging and thus to readers' expectations. To perform the reversal to end all such reversals, the early American novel releases land from property, and property from person, so the materials of biography can enter into circulation. Where festival releases popular energy within the limits of a performance space, the early American novel allows that energy to break the frame that contains personal experience and use it to fuel the vital pulse of a potentially boundless network.

Aspect 4: Hubs

Such a narrative will inevitably form *hubs*. Any self-organizing form worth its salt inevitably raises the question of whether it can maintain the practical features of that organization over time. At least two problems gnaw away at most attempts to answer this question.[10] First and foremost, there is the instability of any system whose only inalienable property happens to be an obstinate resistance to becoming property. From this, it follows that to contemplate these novels as self-forming, or autogenic, we have to alter our understanding of form itself. But before we can do so, we have to question the prevailing assumption that a novel, like a household, is condemned to reproduce itself, that only by reproducing key features of other novels can it maintain the continuity that we ascribe to individuals, families, species, and literary genres. If to become an American novel, a novel had to destroy the form of household with which the genre was identified, then how do we explain the production of so many recognizably novelistic works of prose during the early republic? Moreover, what ensured that the collective intelligence we call a readership would consolidate itself as such around that model of community, as the sheer number of these prose narratives suggest was indeed the case?

Compounding the violence that makes it possible for the novel to reorganize its material is the equally vexing problem that any system of social relations is exclusion-

ary in its own distinctive way. Much like a model of government, a network novel defines itself not only by its capacity to connect various elements of a population, but also by what exclusions allow it to make the connections it does. The network of social connections that organizes early American fiction was far more restrictive than it appears to the reader, given that it automatically excluded those who, like the tribes of native Americans, generally lacked the ability to read vernacular English. To understand how the novel imagined that such a system of social relations could sustain its limits over time, we have to reimagine the household as a *hub*. Translate what we mean by hub into today's network science, and we find that insofar as hubs establish "preferential attachments," they serve as social glue to maintain connections among members. While "random networks, despite their redundancy, fall apart quickly in the face of an uncoordinated attack" (Buchanan 131), networks with strong hubs or superhubs connecting smaller hubs tend to stay intact through the loss of many of their peripheral members. Once we think of a household as a hub or relay station rather than as an enclosure, we can see why a household would **363** defeat its purpose and disappear were it to prevent strangers from passing through. On the other hand, the kind of indiscriminate mingling that occurs at the limits of a network would keep the household—and by implication the novel—from developing an enduring identity.

Enter the seduction story, perhaps the most popular fictional form of this period. Key to the success of Anglo-American seduction stories throughout the antebellum period is their ability to convert the heroine into an unanchored and permeable body no longer eligible for the role of wife. By virtue of its reproductive insufficiency, this body was capable of serving as a hub. Rather than exclude these women, as the English novel generally does, the American novel lets them remain in the household so long as their permeability provides the means of connecting otherwise unrelated individuals. How does removing an otherwise quite eligible woman from the marriage market promote social relationships unthinkable within the constraints of family? Even in the best of eighteenth-century circles, courtship required a series of near misses before a woman identified a man with whom she could share a reproductive future: should she err in the direction of promiscuity, a woman would take herself out of circulation and become an abject sexual object. But let her err in the direction of purity, and she all but vanishes from the network that connects individuals to one another. The fallen heroine serves both functions at once—indiscriminate mingling and strict regulation of sexual reproduction.

When we situate the seduction novel in the same predicament as its heroine, we are in a position to appreciate how it uses that dilemma to open up a multitude of possible narrative connections. Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* is one of any number of such novels that addresses this issue. Once she has fallen, Eliza the coquette remains very much in circulation as a cautionary tale. Converted into a repentant epistolary heroine, the fallen woman serves as a relay station distributing her experience to countless readers. By weeding out the truly unsuitable suitors, her story maximizes

the capacity of the community to expand and yet retain its coherence. The advantageously managed hub is essential to the self-organizing community envisioned by these early novels. Where the novel by its dependence on print vernacular screens out those who lack a rather high degree of literacy, the hub limits the imagined community further by filtering out those incapable of learning from the sorry experiences of others, thus minimizing relationships that would disrupt its ability to make preferential attachments.

Aspect 5: Anamorphosis

Anamorphosis is most often used by way of reference to the visual arts to refer to a peculiar form of distortion. Twisted beyond recognition, the anamorphic object becomes intelligible only as something seen from a double perspective. To recognize what has been disfigured beyond recognition, one has to know exactly where to position oneself in spatial and/or temporal terms. Only then can one see that object as both normative and monstrous, conjoining irreconcilable perspectives within a single framework. The capacity to be different things depending on the perspective from which one sees it enables the anamorphic object to hold together a fractured field of vision while expanding it to expose the limits of any normative perspective.

Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle famously wakes up from a long sleep to confront the unrecognizable face of George Washington peering from a frame that used to contain a portrait of King George III. Where dispersal detaches property from owner and sends it into circulation, anamorphosis pulls those fragments together, as in the case of the two portraits, to form an object that appears from one perspective to be an entirely different thing than it does from another. Such is the case of Sheppard Lee's body. Stolen by a German doctor and embalmed, a display of his body provides the centerpiece of a spectacle that advertises mummification as the best way to protect oneself from the unhealthy influence of the American environment. Lee arrives on the scene in the person of Mr. Megrim. As he recognizes to "my shock and amazement [...] in that lifeless body, my own lost body," an anamorphic object is born (Bird 406). Those gathered for the purpose of viewing the human body as an object instead encounter a body available for use but not for ownership. Animated by the return of its original inhabitant, the mummified body hops out of the display case, gathers up its toga, and runs for its very life.

Given the extensive use to which Melville, say, in *The Confidence Man* or *Benito Cereno,* and, still later, Henry James, in so many of his novels, make of anamorphosis, we must assume that these authors, like Stowe (who sees the situation from both North and South, the perspectives of both slave and owner), exploited the intrinsic reversibility of anamorphosis to say what they wanted their novels to say. Its advantage rested on the ability of anamorphosis to conjoin conflicting viewpoints without reconciling them. This enabled novels to assemble a differential system that included

numerous concepts of the whole in which each played a part, including concepts that contradicted one another. The hinge that allows what is familiar in one view to appear hideously deformed in another also meant that an obtuse view could erupt within the normative framework without deracinating either. Anamorphosis not only provided readers scattered throughout the Atlantic world with a way of imagining themselves as part of a network resistant to unity, but let them know from which position within that network they were being addressed.

Conclusion: The Art of Statelessness

We blame the relative neglect of the early American novel on a canonical standard first established by Sir Walter Scott's *Lives of the Novelists* (1821-24) and then promulgated over a century later by the likes of E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, as well as the many attempts by American critics to formulate a national tradition that equates the English version of the novel with the novel itself, making it the center of a system that consequently had no center. But is it really fair to blame these post-war critics? Their sense of their nation's durability had been shaken, and they wanted to ensure its continuity through the centuries as the object of novelistic representation and the best possible way of imagining community. Acting on this common impulse, they created a lineage for the novel that depended on reproducing certain features, all of which observe the logic of property and make the novel itself an expression of the immunization paradigm. We hold the same post-war definition of the novel form responsible for our habit of thinking of American, Canadian, and Australian novels in hyphenated terms. In doing so, we implicitly define them as localized deviations from a normative standard rather than as integral parts of the multinational and metastatic expansion of the book market that Franco Moretti traces in his *Atlas of the European Novel*. Our argument is based on what we consider convincing evidence that the eighteenth-century reader just did not see social relations in the same terms that readers after James Fenimore Cooper apparently did. We believe that may well hold true as well for those novels in English classified as post-colonial, a denomination that automatically puts them in a subordinate position to European realism.

While fiction published in recent decades is well beyond the scope of this essay, our understanding of the novels of the early republic suggests to us that the capabilities and limitations of that earlier network form are undergoing changes as it confronts conditions for making sense of a present that bear uncanny resemblance to the conditions that novelists confronted in early British America. We are not suggesting that early British American novels were exceptional in this respect. Quite the contrary. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James C. Scott considers those populating a national landscape dotted with "little nodes of hierarchy and power [that] were both unstable and geographically confined" as virtually stateless people.[11] Given that most of its

inhabits indeed lived outside the ambit of colonial government and were similarly affiliated with very different local communities, much of North America would, in all likelihood, have struck the European as quite like the stateless community that Scott describes as a periphery without a center and refers to as "a world of fragments" (7).

If its inhabitants experienced early America in similar terms—as historian Richard White convinces us many of them did—then American novelists of that time could not have hoped to make sense of their world in relation to some form of sovereignty—whether that of the federal government or of those opposed to the state's imposition on their individual sovereignty. To address the inhabitants of such a middle ground—natives, immigrants, refugees, outcasts, speculators, adventurers, military people—the early novel had to imagine ways of occupying this territory that did not prevent the flow of goods and people by subjecting them to one form of domination. Judging by its proliferation during the period from the 1780s up to the 1830s, the network novel apparently addressed the need to imagine community without some form of sovereignty.

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It does not require specialized knowledge of the contemporary field to see that the capabilities and limitations of the network novel are undergoing important changes as it confronts conditions for making sense of a present that bear an uncanny resemblance to the conditions that novelists confronted in early America—an accelerated erosion of local differences and their reappearance in new technological conflations of people, goods, and information. If, on such a cursory glance at the evidence, we decided to venture a claim, it would be to note the obvious—that is, that a network novel is presently emerging from the cocoon of an outmoded modernism. Populations formed by almost instantaneous communication, connected to a fragile landscape and vanishing animal species, broken up and scattered by the policies of corporations that are indistinguishable from governments, and reduced to scavenging by the subsumption of other forms of labor by capital itself have obviously prompted contemporary novelists to abandon the immunization paradigm that sustains the fantasy of individualism by protecting private property. Deploying the very tropes to which we attribute the emergence of the network form in the early American novel, these Anglophone novels exploit logistic apparatuses and forms of dispossession that feed global capitalism. Unwilling to stop there, these novels devote their considerable powers of invention to reorganizing the debris of a shattered modernity as an affective network that combats the alienation produced by substitution and hierarchy with metastatic horizontal connections. If thinking in terms of the tropes of national community—bounded and sovereign—kept us from understanding how early American novels imagined community, those tropes cannot hope to elucidate the world we now confront and the strange new novels that strive to imagine community there. But we do think the formal operations of the network can.

NOTES

1. To understand how difficult it was to determine the constituent exclusions of this imaginary world, as well as the forms of sovereignty that enforce them, it is useful to recall that, during the period from 1790 to 1802, Congress passed four different naturalization acts. This was also a decade when at least 100,000 immigrants entered the US. The Naturalization Act of 1790 enabled an immigrant who was both free and white to become a citizen after just two years of residency. Worried about the number of potential citizens entering the country from revolutionary France and the increase in immigrants fleeing troubles in Ireland, Congress passed the Naturalization Act of 1795 extending minimum residency to five years. Those who were naturalized were required to swear allegiance to the US, renounce loyalty to their former sovereigns, and give up any and all claims to noble ranks and titles. This act was in turn revised by the Naturalization Act of 1798, which required immigrants to register with a proper agent within forty-eight hours of arriving in the US, stretched the waiting period for citizenship from five to fourteen years, and prohibited anyone from obtaining citizenship who was a citizen of a state with which the US was at war. The Naturalization Law of 1802 repealed the Act of 1798. With a national debate on immigration running for the entire decade, it is not surprising that novels featuring a cosmopolitan but still American population would have popular appeal.

2. In his "Introduction" to the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argues that "[i]n contrast to the immense influence that has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meagre" (3). He sees the solution to this problem of omission in "the cultural roots of nationalism" (7).

3. "The component parts of the people [...] become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences," according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, while the many singularities that make up a multitude "stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people." Although such a population "remains multiple," they continue, this does not make it "anarchical or incoherent" (99).

4. Martin Brückner calls attention to "a runaway real estate market from New England to Georgia" during the eighteenth century: "Speculative transactions in landed property (mostly property that was yet to be occupied by the English) soared" (24).

5. John Locke famously wrote that "in the beginning, all the World was *America*" (301).

6. Esposito's statement suggests that "the common" is not entirely benign and, if instituted in the age of property, will necessarily prove destructive however positive and egalitarian its ultimate objectives are. Indeed, the dispersal of property tends to assume such an aggressive role in the novels we examine.

7. For the difference between "dispersal" and "diaspora," see Tölölyan.

8. For a detailed description of this phenomenon as the central event of a short story, see Armstrong.

9. For a full explanation of this ritual transformation, see Clark and Holquist 302.

10. Our understanding of these two characteristics of self-organizing communities is owing to Elinor Ostrum's *Governing the Common*.

11. James C. Scott contends that "[a]t a time when the state seems pervasive and inescapable," we forget "that for much of human history, living within or outside the state—or in a intermediate zone—was a choice" (7), an "alternative to life within the state" (6). The novels of early British America are often staged in such a zone, as are an increasing number of contemporary novels.

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