

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Leonard Tennenhouse: The Importance of Feeling English

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2007, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

DIASPORA AND EMPIRE

AT THE RISK of stating the obvious, let me begin by asserting that any discussion of American literature will at some point have to address the questions of how soon and in what respects British Americans began to think of themselves as American rather than British. Instead of assuming that different national governments mean different national literatures, I come to this problem from the contrary perspective: that the separation of American from British literatures is still at issue and was therefore nothing like the clean break that we tend to project backward onto the late eighteenth century.¹ I plan to look at a wide body of Anglophone literature from the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries for the purpose of discovering when it began to divide internally into recognizable British and American traditions. With this material, I move back and forth across the Atlantic, explaining how the American tradition defined itself in an ongoing and yet changing relation to the British. In this respect, my project participates in the growing body of scholarship concerned with transatlantic literary relations.²

My argument begins with the proposition that during the period from 1750–1850 American authors and readers were more interested in producing and consuming English literature than in creating, to borrow Elaine Showalter’s phrase, “a literature of their own.”³ The literary evidence indeed suggests that during this period, most writers and readers in America considered themselves to be members of the generic English culture that we generally mean by “British culture,” and they thought of their literature as products of such a culture. But this hardly means that anything written before political independence was British. Nor can we assume that a drive for cultural autonomy must have accompanied political independence. Such a view regards American literature as a coherent body of writing whose colonial-era production sounded themes that resonated with the writers of the American Renaissance. Hence the continuous search within a field constituted solely by American texts to find “profound continuities between early American literary expression and the classic literature of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.”⁴ An alternative view argued most forcefully by William Spengemann claims that literary history

should not be confused with the history of the national culture. Writing in the English language, particularly when writers in British America lacked political autonomy, should in his view be read as British since it is of a piece with other British writings.⁵ To my way of thinking, both views are only half true.

During the period leading up to the Revolutionary War, British America was indeed composed of British colonies. On the other hand, most colonists from the British Isles were all too aware of the fact that they no longer lived there. Even though, and perhaps because, they had to do so under conditions that differed sharply from those that fostered literature back in England, from captivity narratives through the earliest sentimental fiction produced on this side of the Atlantic, colonial authors generally wanted to write as Englishmen.⁶ In the face of the French threat during the Seven Years War, they indeed felt especially inspired to reaffirm their British identification. Benjamin Franklin confessed to Lord Kames in 1760 that “no one can rejoice more sincerely than I do, on the Reduction of Canada; and this not merely as I am a Colonist, but as I am a Briton.”⁷ In 1765 John Adams felt the need to ask, “Is there not something extremely fallacious in the common-place images of mother country and children colonies? Are we the children of Great Britain any more than the cities of London, Exeter, and Bath? Are we not brethren and fellow subjects with those in Britain, only under a somewhat different method of legislation, and a totally different method of taxation?”⁸ For a colonist in America to declare himself a Briton was evidently to make a reasonable claim to national identity. Although they were called “Americans,” that term did not in any way cancel out the more fundamental British identity that tied them to their nation of origin.⁹ Indeed, until the decade of the Revolution, each colony observed separate lines of economic and cultural ties to the metropolitan center. As a result, Michael Zuckerman notes, “Americans were still very far from being a people bonded by a shared sense of purpose and identity.” What self-awareness we see is that of people who, he contends, have “come to think of themselves as Pennsylvanians or Virginians rather than as Americans.”¹⁰

After the War of Independence, there is every reason to believe that citizens of the new United States knew—and felt keenly—that they were no longer subjects of Great Britain. But it does not necessarily follow from this that the colonists renounced their British identity in other respects simply because they rejected British government. Political separation did not in fact cancel out the importance of one’s having come to America from Great Britain. Indeed, the literary evidence indicates that the newly liberated colonists became if anything more intent on keeping the new homeland as much as possible like the old one in terms of its language, literature, and any number of cultural practices. To the degree that it sub-

jected Englishness to circumstances that could not be imagined back in England, literature written by, for, or about British America was never really British. But to the degree that those who authored and read such literature not only tried to maintain an English cultural identity but also sought to put the stamp of Englishness on the new nation, neither can that literature be called American in any pure and simple way. I take issue, in other words, with the critical practice that for a hundred years has used J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's "What is an American" (Letter III, *Letters From an American Farmer*) as the delineation of a new national culture. Despite the many helpful insights to be gained from recent attempts to compare the literature of the new republic to modern postcolonial literature written in South Asian, Caribbean, or African countries, there was no oppressed or colonized English-language culture of British North America waiting to emerge as soon as decolonization began.¹¹ Literature produced under the conditions I am describing requires an explanatory model that acknowledges a perplexed but continuing relationship between nation-state and national culture.¹² With some important adjustments, I propose, the cultural logic of diaspora offers such a model.

A Culturalist View of Diaspora

It is common to think of diasporic communities as made up of a homogeneous people who have fled war, hunger, religious persecution, or economic hardships in the mother country and so exist as distinct minorities in an adopted homeland. For many years, the term diaspora was applied to four great dispersions of this kind: Jewish, Greek, Armenian, and African. Recently, as many as eighty other groups have either taken on the term to describe their status or have been classified as a diaspora by social scientists. In addition to the dispersion itself, members of a diaspora share some collective memory of the motherland as the diasporic group is scattered across more than one geographical location. This memory affords the motive and basis for maintaining a relationship to the nation of origin, and its consciousness of that relationship becomes central to the identity of the diasporic group. We might think of Franklin's claim that he is a Briton as an example of just this kind of identification. There are several other points on which most scholars of diaspora agree: despite their various dislocations, members of a diaspora maintain cultural ties to their nation of origin and believe someday they will return there. Members of one diasporic group may also maintain ties to other such groups, provided they share the same attachment to their nation of origin. When this double tie breaks down, we can say that the group ceases to be a diaspora and becomes a subculture of the host nation.¹³

The prevailing critical tendency, as I see it, has been to understand diaspora as something on the order of a refusal to assimilate that preserves the ways of the mother country in defiance of the host culture. I want to extend the concept to the situation in British North America, where the culture of one diasporic group—namely the British—assumed hegemony over several others. We have every reason to think that many of the British men and women in North America held onto the idea that they could return to Great Britain. At the very least, they imagined that they were sufficiently English to fit in among their kinsmen back in England. Certainly throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the pattern of immigration and emigration had its ebbs and flows. As political conditions changed, some immigrants to New England did in fact return home—as happened, most notably, during King Philip’s War. In other cases, sermons and writings imagined New England as a haven for the reformers of the church who would return to England either in person or as an example to continue the reformation of the church in England. Cotton Mather predicted as much, when he compared “the English Christians” cast in “the Dark Regions of America” to “the *Light*, which from the midst of this *Outer Darkeness*, is now to be Darted over unto the other side of the *Atlantick Ocean*.”¹⁴ Even those destined never to return to England, many of whom wrote in America, first published their sermons and their poetry in England and for an English readership. As Michael Warner observes, “Virtually every colonial writer looks both homeward to the seat of imperial culture and outward to the localities that would remain for them subordinate.”¹⁵ The other side of the same cultural coin was the colonists’ fear of going native in the wilderness of America and so losing the cultural alternatives that made one recognizably English. The possibility of permanent separation from the English community is especially evident in captivity narratives that portray death as far preferable to either assimilating to Indian ways or undergoing conversion to Catholicism should the captive be turned over to the French.¹⁶

It may seem a stretch to equate colonial Americans with such classic diasporic groups as Jews or Armenians, not to mention Africans violently ripped from their natal lands and shipped to the Americas in chains. It is more common to assume that once the colonists achieved political and economic independence from England, they became a nation in their own right and were no longer concerned with returning to the nation of their origin. Were I actually committed to the classic definition of “diaspora,” I would have to agree that the term does not apply to British Americans. To understand how the cultural logic of diaspora might indeed hold true for the colonists in America, especially in the years leading up to and immediately following the War for Independence, one must develop a somewhat looser concept. This second notion of “diaspora” neither depends on the

dispersed group's direct memory of a single place of origin nor does it require members to remain intent on returning there. Quite the contrary, in order for this second model of diaspora to prove useful, the homeland has to disappear as a geopolitical site to which the diasporic group can entertain the possibility of actually returning.

There are several reasons why a site of national origin might vanish. It could be displaced several times over by the migrations of the dispersed groups. As the Jews were removed from ancient Israel to Babylon, Assyria, then Persia, the Roman Empire, and, later, to the Abbasid and Ottoman Empires, they developed centers of learning dedicated to remembering the homeland. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarim remind us that the place remembered as Zion underwent significant revision as it was reimagined and reproduced through ritual practices over time and in different places throughout the world.¹⁷ The same principle holds true, even moreso perhaps, for the African diaspora. Dispersed by the international commerce in slaves during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Africans had little opportunity to develop commemorative institutions over four centuries and a series of removals. With successive generations, the memory of Africa was displaced by cultural practices designed perhaps at first to commemorate the place of origin but soon enough to recall subsequent displacements—Brazil, the Caribbean, the rural American South, northern urban ghettos, and so forth.

As the actual memory of the motherland undergoes successive displacements, the members of the diaspora pursue a narrative trajectory that is less a departure and return and more of an extended detour. That is to say, the members of the diaspora move farther from the homeland with each attempt to return or recapture it. Moreover no two branches of a given diaspora undergo precisely the same sequence of displacements or detours; each hangs onto some features of the mother culture and abandons others as these features succeed or fail to accommodate to the new cultural milieu. Over the course of time, the various acts of commemoration that make each group cohere and give it a distinctive identity within a host culture produce a purely imaginary construct that replaces the sense of home grounded on experience and perpetuated by actual memory. In many instances the place of origin no longer exists as a geopolitical reality. Thus, for example, the notion of Zion serves as a kind of placeholder for the original homeland for many Jews with quite different points of origins. So, too, a generic pan-Africa represents the place of origin for many African Americans.

Let us assume there is an implicit cultural limit to the centrifugal dynamic whereby a diasporic culture develops internal differences through the process of dispersal. If the diaspora is going to maintain its foreignness rather than turn into one of so many subcultures within a host nation,

horizontal affiliations must develop among its various branches; this happens as together various groups exchange commemorative practices and generalize the homeland, performing acts of community held in common by all Jews or Africans, even at the expense of local practices that serve as relics of actual memory. As various groups of a particular diaspora produce such a purely cultural common ground, a kind of centripetal cultural force begins to counter their geopolitical dispersal. The centripetal force, I must hasten to add, pulls the dispersed groups not back to the place of origin but toward an imagined cultural source that has in fact displaced that origin. This centripetal force is generated by the production of a generic homeland and results in a new sense of collectivity. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy develops a model along precisely these lines to explain how “Africa” became an imaginary homeland for many groups belonging to the African diaspora.¹⁸ His model offers what I regard as the best way to date to understand most modern diasporas, because it bases a group’s ability to maintain a semblance of autonomy and collective identity over time on its cultural practices, not on its ability to trace its genealogy back to some point of origin.

Instead of formulating a continuous tradition that aims at retrieving a lost past, an intellectual process Gilroy identifies with the chronotope of the road, he prefers to think within the chronotope of the crossroad. Let me offer one especially telling example of this alternative notion of cultural transmission that reveals the importance of detours, disruptions, circularity, and exchanges in keeping a diaspora alive and vital even under the conditions of globalization. Gilroy retells the story of musician James Brown’s visit to West Africa in the 1960s. The American failed to find what he went there looking for or indeed anything that could be called “authentic” African music. Instead, Brown encountered African musicians who had listened to his African American band and began imitating his music. He was particularly impressed with Fela Ransome Kuti, whom he describes as “kind of like the African James Brown” (199). While Kuti and his band evidently felt they were discovering their Africanness in James Brown, Brown’s own band was picking up material from the Nigerian musicians. “Some of the ideas my band was getting from that band had come from me in the first place,” he reports, “but that was okay with me. It made the music that much stronger” (199). One can read diasporic cultural materials for the continuities that connect African American music and literature to an “authentic” origin in Africa. Rather than perform an imaginary return, one can look at points of exchange where the groups meet and agree on common ground. What these musicians shared was not the purity of some African origin, but something created in and through cultural exchanges across historical time and geographical space. Both African and African American obviously discovered their Africanness in the other’s performance. Gilroy claims that such an exchange “explodes the dualistic

structure which puts Africa, authenticity, purity, and origin in crude opposition to the Americas, hybridity, creolisation, and rootlessness" (199).

I want to draw a direct parallel between the relationship of modern and antimodern African diasporic cultural traditions, as Gilroy describes them, and the case of American literature. From the earliest attempts to canonize American literature in the nineteenth century to the present day, the tendency has been to trace a lineage of truly American authors either back through the American Renaissance to the Puritan fathers or, alternatively, back through the sentimental tradition to captivity narratives. The scholar-critic who participates in such a project looks for continuities between present-day cultural production and one or the other of these origins. To illustrate the difference with regard to American literature between the classic essentialist model of diaspora and a culturalist model like Gilroy's, we must keep in mind the difference between writing in seventeenth-century colonial America and the literature produced in America during the second half of the eighteenth century. Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, for example, equates her situation as an English woman captive to natives of North America with that of a Christian whose faith is tested in the wilderness. That the traces of what she identified as "English cattle" and an "English path" were equivalent to signs of God's presence should tell us that Rowlandson was writing as an English woman, who wanted to maintain her ties to other English people and ultimately her fitness to return to the community of her origin, or if not that, then the kingdom of heaven.¹⁹ One hundred years later, such authors as Philip Freneau, Timothy Dwight, and Joel Barlow write as Americans reproducing English literature for and about a new nation—whose culture, they insisted, was no less English for having been transferred to and reproduced in North America. In other words, the kind of writer who emerges in America during the second half of the eighteenth century represents a decisive shift away from that of the transplanted English man or woman.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, American authors reinvented the homeland by producing a generic notion of Englishness particularly adapted to the North American situation. In what is considered one of the first American novels, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), the American protagonist can conduct a successful courtship because he is familiar with English letters. By way of contrast, his English predecessors tended to squander the same cultural capital in relationships that read like tawdry tales of seduction. What distinguishes Worthy from the European libertine is a taste in literature that manifests itself in a capacity not only to feel the proper sentiments but also to put them in writing; Worthy wins a wife by means of his skill as a letter writer. We can also see a generalized Englishness produced in the works of Charles Brockden Brown, who was keen on writing a body of American letters that would achieve recognition in England. The protagonist of Brown's *Clara Howard*

displays a single-minded devotion to English literature that would classify his British counterpart as a dilettante. This same devotion on the part of an American artisan makes him worthy of marrying the daughter of an English gentleman. Rather than preserve an ancient tie to the land from which Englishmen immigrated to America, this novelistic notion of Englishness transforms the concept into one that can travel. “English” is no longer a state of being, nor is it a matter of who one is so much as a performance and a question of what one does. There is abundant historical evidence to back up what these literary examples suggest: that by the last half of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of Americans were thinking of themselves as generically English. T. H. Breen ascribes a notable rise in the consumption of English goods to a “re-Anglicization” of America.²⁰ Differences between the English in Virginia and those in Massachusetts apparently began to matter less than their common cultural ground as British colonials, thanks to what historian Colin Kidd has described as the process of “anglicizing homogenization,” a process that became pervasive from 1760 on.²¹

To remain English—and we have every reason to think most colonial Englishmen wished to do so—they would have had to reproduce certain elements of their Englishness in North America. By ensuring the reproduction of that culture in subsequent generations—which is, I believe, the implicit purpose of any literature, but especially a literature produced in a colonial situation—Anglo-America was reproducing itself. That “self” was a reproduction, not of the mother culture, but of what had from the very beginning been an adaptation of the mother culture to a diasporic setting. From this it follows that a certain adaptation of English culture came to dominate the American colonies because the British did a better job of reproducing the culture of the homeland away from home than, say, the Germans did in Pennsylvania, the French in northern New England, or the Dutch in New York. I am not suggesting that British immigrants were especially good at retaining their sense of themselves overseas. I am only saying that they were especially good at reproducing cultural practices at once adapted for the colonial setting and yet able at once to distinguish Anglo-Americans from every other group and to subordinate other cultures to a pervasively normative and yet curiously elastic definition of Englishness. It is the ability of English culture to travel, take root elsewhere, and subordinate other groups, even to the envy of its competitors, that fascinates me, an ability peculiar not only to the fashion and food ways linked to English culture but to the literature as well. On these grounds, if for no other reason, I argue that we stand to learn something new about American literature and its curious relation to English culture by thinking of it in terms of a diasporic literature—one aimed at reproducing certain traits of Englishness in a radically non-European environment.

Central to my purpose is the separation of the nation as a political entity from the nation as a culture, which allows us to focus on the relationship between the two, rather than read them as two aspects of a single entity.²² Indeed, the literature of the crucial period leading up to the Revolution indicates that English speakers believed they shared a culture with Great Britain. What is more, the literature of the new republic indicates that this concern for maintaining an English identity only intensified after the colonists fought and won political independence from Great Britain. Does seeing the situation this way make our literature any less American? According to the logic of diaspora, not at all. What makes our literature distinctly and indelibly American is our literature's insistence on reproducing those aspects of Englishness that do not require one to be in England so much as among English people. British Americans put their distinctive stamp on the new nation, not because they succeeded in reproducing English culture outside of England so much as because their way of imagining England was more truly American, in the specific sense I have been elaborating, than the signature practices of any other immigrant culture.

Keeping in mind just this much of what I will call the cultural logic of diaspora, we no longer read literature to determine when and how American culture achieved monolithic coherence. Rather than assume that what is most American is some product indigenous to the new United States, I argue that what we mean by American is most likely a reproduction of cultural practices that originated somewhere else. Thinking of the problem this way, we can understand the literature and culture of the United States as a relationship among several diasporic cultures. This relationship is hierarchical and varies not only from one literary epoch to another but also according to region, as new groups acquire the power to represent themselves in literature as distinctive within an internally conflicted and heterogeneous nation. More specifically, we can see how the English diaspora began as a struggle in which relationships among competing immigrant communities, races, and ethnicities allowed each such group to imagine itself politically situated in a differential relation to others.

The American Appetite for British Books

To gather a clear sense of the degree to which transplanted Englishmen and women sought to maintain their cultural ties with the mother country by means of the printed word, we need to look at the history of the book in America. Throughout the more than two hundred years from the colonial period to the early republic, the story of who printed and reprinted British texts, as well as which texts were imported and in what quantities, tells of deep and continuous cultural ties with Great Britain. From Isaiah Thomas's first account of this story in his *History of Printing in America*

(1810) to the on-going multivolume project unfolding under the general title of *The History of the Book in America*, all versions acknowledge that “throughout most of the colonial period most books had to be shipped in whatever the capabilities of the publishing and reprinting in North America.”²³ The reasons for colonial dependence on imported culture are pretty clear. British legal constraints during much of the colonial period, the cost of paper, the availability of presses, the limited size of a readership in any given urban area—all made it easier for booksellers to rely on imported material. Throughout the eighteenth century, as domestic book production grew, American printers devoted their presses to almanacs, sermons (in declining numbers), session law reports, and the like. As a result, colonial booksellers and their customers continued to rely largely on British imports for books on politics and history, belles lettres, and much that was considered useful knowledge.

Until the 1790s, imported English novels remained cheaper than editions reprinted in America. Benjamin Franklin learned that lesson the hard way when he lost money in 1742 on reprinting an edition of *Pamela*.²⁴ Imported British magazines were especially popular, and their material was often reprinted—sometimes without acknowledgment—in American periodical publications. During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, as domestic production of books, magazines, and newspapers increased, Americans consumed imported books and magazines from Great Britain at an ever-increasing rate. Following a decline during the war years, the number of imports of British books quickly returned to prewar levels once the Treaty of Paris was signed. Going by the number of advertisements in American books and newspapers for reprints of British titles, and ignoring all those books that were pirated, imported, or purchased through British book agents, Hugh Amory and David D. Hall report that there were “133 editions down to 1749, 163 from 1750–1774, and 982 in the final quarter of the century.”²⁵ James Raven describes the paradox in this way:

By 1770, more books were exported annually from England to the American colonies than to Europe and the rest of the world combined, albeit with limited demand on the Continent for books in English. We are unlikely to be surprised that the importation of books from the mother country was the mainstay of bookselling in the early, sparsely populated years of colonial settlement, but that this volume should have increased rather than declined with the growth of colonial production is not so easily explained.²⁶

Along with an increase in the importation of books from Great Britain, there was a decided shift in the kinds of items imported, including not only “belles lettres and novels . . . but also learned literatures, periodicals, and newspapers.”²⁷ This increase was not a phenomenon peculiar to the Northeast alone but prevailed throughout the colonies.

Contributing to the number of books coming into America from British booksellers was the immigration of Scots and Irish printers and booksellers who drew on business and family contacts back home to aid in creating and satisfying the demand for the latest British books.²⁸ In his study of the book trade in the South, Calhoun Winton writes, “Scotland was a major exporter of people in the eighteenth century; important among those groups seeking opportunity abroad were members of the book and printing trades. David Hall, Franklin’s Philadelphia partner, was a Scot as was Robert Bell, the reprinter.”²⁹ Another Scot, Robert Wells, set up shop in Charleston, where according to Winton “in 1774 and 75, Wells advertised in his paper more than twenty titles of books then selling well in the English-speaking market, Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield*, for example. This tracking of London publications represented an augmentation of his business; clearly, he felt that the market for such books was improving” (237). In addition to summaries of law books and histories imported from Britain and many works of belles lettres by such writers as Edward Young, James Thomson, Alexander Pope, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and Tobias Smollett, weekly journals were especially popular with southern readers. These weeklies “contained much international and intercolonial and local news,” Richard Beale Davis notes, adding, “they were also literary journals, presenting essays formal and familiar and borrowed from each other or from British sources, British poems, and even (occasionally) British plays.”³⁰ His summary account of the personal libraries and book purchases in the colonial South prompts Davis to comment, “The southern colonial and early national bookshelf . . . probably resembled libraries in the farmhouses or small manor houses of rural England” (130).

The South was not alone in its preference for British literature or in booksellers who claimed to be the best or most reliable source of British books. In this respect, the book market in northern cities resembled that of Charleston. James N. Green quotes the bookseller James Rivington, with bookstores in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, who proclaimed in 1762 that he was “the only London bookseller in America.”³¹ This claim was intended to guarantee that his were the latest London imports. In describing the customers and the market for books, Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall note, “The pattern of sales in [Jeremy] Condy’s store [in Boston] seems to prevail elsewhere. . . . Most of the books (counted by the number of titles) in these stores came from Britain, most were expensive, and most were available in very small quantities” (389).³² As for less expensive books, Reilly and Hall explain, “Many chapbooks or other kinds of cheap books were produced overseas; in the 1770s Henry Knox was importing thousands of chapbooks costing 2d. wholesale from the London trade, some of them copies of children’s books issued by the London bookseller John Newbery, others abridged versions of novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa Harlowe*” (391). “One surprising conse-

quence of American independence from the British Empire,” write David Hall and Hugh Amory, “was to reinforce the anglicization of print that culturally was a strong feature of the pre-war decades.”³³

At the very least, these numbers give us cause to rethink Benedict Anderson’s well-known account of the origin of nationalism as the rise of an imagined community of novel readers.³⁴ According to Anderson, fiction and newspapers enabled colonial readers to imagine themselves as part of a community of people much like themselves who would probably never meet or exchange a word of conversation but who could nevertheless imagine others like themselves engaged in reading the same materials, sharing the same views, and reacting in similar ways to the fate of a character. Such readers would consequently think of themselves as members of a community that may be socially dispersed but who shared the same culture. Much as I have been indebted to this model, I have come to realize that it simply will not hold up under the weight of evidence that indicates American readers preferred British books and magazines even, and especially, when they were struggling for political independence from England. Were we to take at its word Anderson’s argument concerning the impact of literacy, we would have to conclude from my sampling of evidence from the history of the book in America that the colonial American readership imagined itself as a nation of English readers.

This comes close to what Raymond Williams means by “hegemony,” a culture’s capacity to dominate—and remain “the culture”—without imposing its rule everywhere and at all times.³⁵ To maintain the authority of a national culture, a particular set of ethnic practices has to dominate the discourses that matter, literature chief among them. To insist on national difference, various users of the language must reproduce it, often in its most authoritative or prestigious forms. Only by reproducing the terms of their own domination, according to the model I am using, can new groups introduce the differences that may, at some point, add up to their cultural emergence—in the case at hand, a different way of thinking in English that elevates American features of the culture over those designated as deriving from Britain.³⁶ America’s brand of Englishness, I am suggesting, is precisely what made it American.

Colonial American Poetry as a Descriptive Theory of Diaspora

Now, for a practical example familiar to every scholar of early American literature. Among the figures that British letters made available to American authors and readers, “The Rising Glory of America” was especially appealing, I believe, because it could be read in two ways: one, as a way of insisting that the center of civilization shifted from Rome to England with

the decline of the Roman Empire and therefore celebrated English culture; and two, as a way of insisting that English culture improved as it shifted again westward to America and away from Europe. By invoking this trope, American authors could think of themselves as English even though they were not British. “The Rising Glory” could perform this legerdemain because it was in fact two tropes in one.

Developed by Roman poets to account for the transfer of imperial power from Athens to Rome, and imitated by poets over time as learning migrated from Rome to later imperial centers, the first trope under consideration, *translatio imperii*, predicted the westward transfer of imperial authority. During the Middle Ages, *translatio imperii* was used to imagine the transfer of such authority from Rome to Charlemagne’s Paris and later to various Italian city-states. By the High Renaissance, poets were already making the case that France, England, or one of a number of other European candidates was the true heir of Roman *imperium*.³⁷ In making this point, such British poets as Dryden, Denham, Pope, Dyer, Dennis, Prior, Collins, Gray, Thomson, and Goldsmith emphasized the traditional link between *translatio imperii* and a second trope, *translatio studii*.³⁸ This second figure described the transfer of learning and the arts, or cultural authority, to the new imperial center. Hence, the lines from Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*: “Learning and Rome alike in empire grew; / And Arts still follow’d where her eagles flew.”³⁹

Among eighteenth-century writers, Bishop Berkeley alone has been credited by many scholars with declaring that the westward movement of empire heralded the certain transfer to America of imperial authority along with art and learning, as indicated quite clearly by his title “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” (1752). “There,” he claims, “shall be sung another golden Age, / The rise of Empire and of Arts” (13–14).⁴⁰ Then—in what only later became the most famous lines of the poem—Berkeley predicts that the transfer of imperial authority shall not continue further west but culminate triumphantly in what American poets would call “the rising glory of America”:

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;
The four first Acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
Time’s noblest Offspring is the last. (21–24)

First written in 1724 and published in a revised form in 1752, Berkeley’s poem had a curious reception in North America. Modern literary critics have been quick to note its influence on any number of colonial American writers.⁴¹ The scholars have not been so quick to note that except for one or two Latin poems that appeared in *Pietas et Gratulatio* (1761) lamenting the death of George II, Berkeley’s combination of the two tropes into one

did not make its appearance in American letters until 1770.⁴² Rather than deal with this time lag, scholars tend to chalk up its prominent appearance to the figure's obvious jingoistic potential, citing its appearance in such poems as John Trumbull's "Prospect of the Future Glory of America" (1770), Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Philip Freneau's *Rising Glory of America* (1771), the version Freneau rewrote after the Revolution, Timothy Dwight's *America* (1780), David Humphreys "On the Future Glory of America," (1780), Joel Barlow's "The Prospect of Peace" (1778) and his *Vision of Columbus* (1787), which was revised and published as the *Columbiad* (1807).⁴³ If Berkeley's poem, as critics claim, offered such poets a way to express their Americanness, one must ask, then why did so many American writers neglect to take advantage of that fact during the very years leading up to the break with Britain?

Two reasons come to mind—one fairly obvious and the other requiring us to assemble the pieces of a rather interesting historical puzzle. I think it's quite possible that in the 1750s and 1760s British Americans intent on preserving their ties to a British culture of origins were less than thrilled with the idea that the muse was disgusted with England in its present state.⁴⁴ From this it follows that a revolutionary readership of the 1770s might well have enjoyed the idea that America was sure to become the new locus of art and learning. So much for the obvious and on to the historical details I consider more interesting.

Berkeley insisted that his "Verses on the Planting of Arts and Learning in America" be read alongside his well known *Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in Our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage Americans to Christianity, By a College to be Erected in the Summer Islands, Otherwise Called the Isles of Bermuda* (1725). He emphasized the necessary relation between the two texts explicitly in a letter to Lord Percival, to whom he sent the poem, and implicitly, when he later published his poem in 1752 on the two pages immediately preceding the reprinted text of his *Proposal*.⁴⁵ While the poem itself may, from our present vantage point, appear to flatter America, the *Proposal* openly insults the English colonists in North America. Here, Berkeley proposes that a college be built in Bermuda for the expressed purpose of civilizing English colonists, whom he as much as accuses of having gone native. As he puts it, "there is at this Day, but little Sense of Religion, and a most notorious Corruption of Manners, in the *English Colonies* settled on the Continent of America, and the Islands."⁴⁶ For Berkeley, the fact that neither the planters, nor their slaves, nor the indigenous peoples living in proximity to the settlements seem to be particularly Christian makes America a spiritual wasteland. To correct this situation, he proposes a school that will equip the sons of planters to minister to their brethren and convert their slaves who, in his opinion, "would only become better Slaves by being Christian" (346).⁴⁷

When read alongside his *Proposal*, Berkeley's poetic celebration of the transfer of learning to America would have conveyed the unflattering message to Americans that they were greatly in need of cultural remediation. But it is only when he aims education at a second group within the colonial population that we see how truly retrograde his project was likely to have seemed to colonial Americans. In proposing that his college would train "savage Americans" to evangelize among their people, he as much as endorses the conquest and conversion policy that was James I's original rationale for colonial expansion. Berkeley reminds his readers that James I had ordered the colonists to propagate "the Gospel and civil Life among the savage Nations of *America*" (357). And if Native American students cannot be "procured by peaceable methods," he contends, then colonists should take "captive the Children of our Enemies" (347). There is little to indicate the poem was well received when it was published with *The Proposal*, but its apathetic reception in 1752 does not tell us whether English colonists found Berkeley's concept of colonialism offensive or whether it struck them as simply irrelevant. Within twenty years, the question was moot.

By the 1770s and 1780s, the policy of "conquest and conversion" that Berkeley had advocated in his *Proposal* would certainly have struck the American reader as both savage and decidedly un-English. Anthony Pagden points out that eighteenth-century authors saw British colonialism as a civilizing project in contrast to the evangelical missions of the French and Spanish, which were intended to conquer and convert the heathens. "In time," according to Pagden "the British dropped all but the minimal pretence to an overseas mission, although their claim to be exporting their own version of 'civilization' survived well into the nineteenth century" (37). Still identifying themselves as English, American readers in all likelihood found in Berkeley's use of *translatio studii* a model of education quite contrary to everything they considered base and decadent about their counterparts in Britain. As Philip Freneau wrote in 1775:

Who could have thought that Britons bore a heart,
Or British troops to act so base a part?
Britons of old renown'd, can they descend
T'enslave their brethren in a foreign land?⁴⁸

On grounds that they were truer to British tradition than any Continental writer, American authors of all stripes embraced the poetics of *translatio studii*. To capitalize on the trope of the "rising glory" for their own purposes, from the 1770s they detached the poem from Berkeley's proposal and published it separately. Once the poem could be read independently, I am suggesting, it began to enjoy wide circulation. When in 1783, for example, Philip Freneau translated l'Abbé Claude Robin's *New Travels Through North America*, he inserted Berkeley's poem as the second page of

the front matter, even though the French original included no such poem.⁴⁹ Freneau reprinted the pair of texts in 1784, and again in 1797 when Robin's text was serialized in Freneau's magazine the *Time-Piece*.

Yes, the historical conditions had certainly changed in favor of its reception, but in order to become the signature trope of American literature, "The Rising Glory" had to be significantly revised. In reproducing the trope, American writers sought to reverse the priorities that Berkeley established by subordinating learning to the goals of empire. They insisted that English colonists came to America, not as conquerors, but like latter-day Israelites who were punished for their (Puritan) literacy and their faith. Freneau and Brackenridge give voice to these sentiments when they contend that "By persecution wrong'd/ And popish cruelty, our father's came/ From Europe's shores to this blest abode" ("Rising Glory," 239–41). Timothy Dwight chimes in with the claim, "Forc'd from the pleasures of their native soil . . . / To these far-distant climes our fathers came" (*America* 4).⁵⁰ In "Columbia," the peaceful ambitions of "our fathers" exist in striking contrast to a Europe that aspires "To conquest, and slaughter" (9). In his "Oration, Delivered July 4th, 1783," John Warren echoes Dwight, as well as Freneau and Brackenridge, in claiming that "religious tyranny had forced from the unnatural bosom of a parent, a race of hardy sons, who chose rather to dwell in the deserts of America with the savage natives, than in the splendid habitations of *more* savage men."⁵¹ Once such poems and orations had offered up lengthy historical accounts differentiating the benign motives of English colonists in North America from the imperialism of "rapacious Spain," it took but a line or two for later poets and orators to invoke the trope as it had been revised. This insistence that English colonialism was not an expression of British imperialism, but quite the reverse, allowed American writers to disavow any similarity between the Spanish practice so regularly condemned in this poetry and the American treatment of Indians by settlers on the frontier. Nor, by the same token, were Americans asked to acknowledge any resemblance between their own Indian policies formulated by Henry Knox and those formulated by Spain a century earlier.⁵²

That American writers were as troubled by forced religious conversion as by military conquest is evident in the frequent references to cultivation that underscore the peaceful nature of their venture in the colonies. Such lines as "Labour fearless rear'd the nodding grain" (Dwight, *America*, 85) and "rough-brow'd Labour every care beguiled" (Dwight, *America*, 68) summon up a Lockean account of territorial acquisition through labor to ward off any resemblance to the Spanish and French practices of conquest, capture, and conversion. This notion of acquisition through the labor of cultivation presupposes that land in the colonies should be considered a *terra nullius*, a territory neither occupied nor under any nation's dominion.

Cultivation of such land provides a purely secular notion of improvement that adds value to it, and in turn bestows ownership on those who work the land. It is with this argument in mind that Freneau and Brackenridge contrast the aggression of Native Americans—acting in the name of French imperial authority—to the peaceful toiling of the members of “the hapless colonies”:

Yes, while they overturn'd the soil untill'd,
 . . . fierce Indian tribes
 With deadly malice arm'd and black design,
 Oft murder'd half the hapless colonies.
 Encourag'd too by that inglorious race
 False Gallia's sons . . . (263–69)

Cultivation of the soil, like education, falls within the Enlightenment category of improvement, which American writers considered the domain of *translatio studii*.

Through repeated usage, American authors shifted the source of imperial authority from political policy, or *translatio imperii*, to education—the domain of *translatio studii*. David Humphreys has exactly this change of emphasis in mind when he tells his readers that “happier days” for America “by hallow'd bards foretold, / Shall far surpass the fabled age of gold.”⁵³ For Humphreys the “rising glory of America” is one and the same as the ascent of education over political force: “The human mind its noblest pow'rs display, / And knowledge, rising to meridian day, / Shine like the lib'ral sun” (557–58). Thus the transfer of learning, as he imagines it, works dialectically to displace government by conquest and conversion with government by education and commerce. The same inversion of Berkeley's tropes was soon played out by so many hands in so many different texts that it became rather commonplace and was likely to be hauled out for such occasions as Enos Hitchcock's oration for July 4, 1793. In Hitchcock's words, “To the early care of our ancestors to establish literary, and encourage religious institutions, are we much indebted for the accomplishment of the late revolution, which shows us the vast importance of paying great attention to the rising sons and daughters of America, by giving them an enlightened and a virtuous education.”⁵⁴ In all these instances, the trope of the rising glory does not suggest that the new site where learning flourishes has moved farther from its source. To the contrary, English culture has simply been purified as it moved westward. As Berkeley had promised, America is not only “Time's noblest Offspring” but also “the last.”

In claiming to be more English than their English counterparts, American authors were arguably no longer British. They were in fact mounting a challenge to the authority of the mother culture. This in a nutshell is the logic of diaspora: a displaced people, in imaginatively asserting their iden-

tity as if it were their culture of origin, transforms that culture into one capable of reproducing itself outside the mother culture. Even as the American colonies in British North America moved toward separation and independence, they increased their consumption of English culture and reproduced their own version of Englishness. This logic was figured as the very notion of *imperii studii*, which corresponds, I would argue, to a model of diaspora that depends less on a specific place of origin than on reinventing a cultural homeland that appeals to a group of immigrants and settlers requiring a new basis of identity to draw them together. The culture that was produced in response to such a need among the British in North America turned out to be one that could travel and adapt to new economic circumstances. Thus, I am suggesting, the trope of “the rising glory” contains a theory of cultural renewal as repetition with a difference and links that theory implicitly to the making of a modern nation. In arriving at this conclusion, I want to insist that American authors not only used Berkeley’s trope to carry out this transformation but also imagined English literature as the instrument of change.