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The Extent of Commerce: the French and English versions of Crèvecoeur's Letters

J. Hector St.-John de Crèvecoeur's most well-known work plays on the several intertwined meanings that commerce carried in the eighteenth century: 1) the exchange of one commodity for another; 2) the exchange of thoughts and ideas; 3) association with others—sociable intercourse. Published in English in London in 1782 and in French in Paris in 1784, *Letters from an American Farmer/Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* is framed as an epistolary correspondence sent to an English gentleman who had visited "Farmer James," the persona Crèvecoeur takes on in this quasi-fictional work. (It has been suggested that this addressee functions as a stand-in for the Abbé Raynal, the dedicatee of the English version of the book.) The work's epistolary nature functions as a form of ersatz sociable commerce—a conversation among absent friends, as the period often conceived of it—and inserts its content within a transatlantic trade of ideas. At the same time, the *Lettres/Letters* focuses, in its representation of British North America, on the state of commercial exchange, as well as America's distinctive forms of association and sociability.

This paper's focus on the various, related meanings of commerce serves as a means of investigating the relationship between Crèvecoeur's representation of America and his movement in the world of *gens de lettres* and publishers in European capitals. In particular, it allows me to examine the ways that commerce, in all of its meanings for this text, serves to extend sociability spatially. For Crèvecoeur, on the one hand, colonial society is made up of neither the hierarchical and personal set of relations that Tocqueville referred to as Europe's "society of orders," nor the deracinated individuals that Raynal and others feared. It is rather a loose form of association, held together through reciprocal needs, interests, and desires. Crèvecoeur's challenge, in the *Lettres/Letters*, then, is to imagine how ethical accountability and one's sense of contact may function over great distances. In examining the various means through which Crèvecoeur attempts to represent such an extended form of sociable exchange, I also show how tightly related is Crèvecoeur's attempt to participate, through the *Lettres/Letters* in a cosmopolitan network of men of letters—or, as he puts it, an "extensive

intellectual consanguinity."