Claude Francois de Lezay-Marnesia, *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*, ed. and introd. Benjamin Hoffmann; trans. Alan J. Singerman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 232 pp.

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The three epistles that compose Lezay-Marnesia's *Letters*—which first saw French publication in 1792, was banned immediately by the Girondists, and finally saw full publication in 1800—take up only about 75 pages of Benjamin Hoffmann's extraordinarily well-crafted edition of this very interesting book. Moreover, Lezay-Marnesia constantly digresses in footnotes, and each letter is addressed to a unique reader. At times, reading it feels like Laurence Sterne crossed with David Foster Wallace and, aided by Hoffmann's masterful interventions, Singerman's seemingly effortless translation, and the well-chosen mix of archival and better-known materials for the appendices, *Letters* inadvertently and amusingly reflects, in textual format, the chaos that was the early West in the 1790s.

Lezay-Marnesia, like the much more familiar Hector St. John de Crevecouer, was a lower-level French nobleman recollecting his time in the States. Beyond that, they share little. Lezay-Marnesia was middle-aged when he came to America, an investor in Joel Barlow's Scioto Company. Barlow and friends had opened a Paris office to sell lands that had been neither secured from their indigenous occupants nor purchased from the debt-ridden US government, whose Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was constructed to erase that debt through land sales to speculators and, then, settlers. Upon the French Revolution, Lezay-Marnesia found in the Company's promotional materials (reproduced here in an Appendix) an outlet for French nobility displaced and largely stripped of their ancestral lands, a place where they could recreate the earlier eighteenth-century French countryside, governed by enlightened aristocrats and members of the descending classes who knew their places in the social and intellectual hierarchy of man. Eventually, they imagined cities, academies, and universities, and, eventually, political independence from the Americans whose democratic culture and condition Lezay-Marnesia disdained.

Obviously, this project was doomed to fail, even as other post-1763 French exile communities in southern Ohio, such as Gallipolis, thrived: Barlow's company never secured the lands, the Shawnees Confederacies kept defeating the American armies and militias every summer before 1794, and very few other investors were found. The final two letters were written as Lezay-Marnesia struggled to return to France after the Scioto fiasco. The three letters—each on its own and in conversation with the others—however, demonstrate both a fascinating personality and perspective on a writer who possessed a

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remarkable fluidity of style and a unique vantage from which to expose the confusion and complexity of the new nation's west.

The first letter is to M. Jacque-Henri-Adrien, Marquis de Lezay-Marnesia, and is written from Marietta, Ohio, where disappointment and abject failure abound. Yet our author refuses to give up hope. As it's a letter—albeit still a sales pitch—to a friend—its voice is fairly casual. After a Sternean story of stealing a kiss from a Shawnee maiden, Lezay-Marnesia comes to praise the industriousness and social discipline of the Moravians who have settled in the region. At the same time, he demonstrates his acute ability to perceive the profound flaws of Anglo-American settlers, for whom he has little good to say. On the subject of acquiring lands cleared by Anglo settlers, he writes, "none are as fickle as they are because none are so lazy and subject to boredom. They constantly need to be stimulated by new things" (67), a darkly prescient quality that Emerson would praise and Melville would damn.

The second letter was written from Pittsburgh and represents the volume's quite significant contribution to the tradition of utopian literature derived from Thomas More. The Scioto Company having vanished, Lezay-Marnesia refuses to give up hope, and writes to Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre to recruit funds and settlers for another planned colony in the Ohio Valley. In the letter, he lays out his plan for the ideal settlement/colony centered, again, on a benevolent and enlightened aristocracy, a plan in many ways resembling Gilbert Imlay's from *The Emigrants* (1792). One crucial difference, however, is Lezay-Marnesia's creation of space for a Catholic church, whereas Imlay's settlement was to reject all such presences. Lezay-Marnesia holds such institutions to be necessary:

> The inhabitants of the frontiers of the United States, scattered sparsely in the mountains, with little communication between them, demonstrate the excesses that characterize human beings who have been deprived of any church doctrine and the degradation to which they sink. More isolated than the savages, who live in tribes, each family of these inhabitants is alone, idle, devoid of morality, and nearly unclothed (78).

While this resembles Crevecouer's frontier "off-casts," it breaks from the era's equation of white savagery and Indianization, as Katy Chiles has tracked. Indeed, differentiation of the forms of savagery looks ahead to later description of "white trash" from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Erskine Caldwell to Caroline Chute.

His final letter was not written, in fact, from the banks of the Ohio. Instead, Lezay-Marnesia wrote to his son while he waited to sail home from Philadelphia. Even after after colonization scheme had collapsed, Lezay-Marnesia persists in his vision of transplanting an elite community from France to America. This time, the scale is smaller.

In a narrative resembling that of Crevecouer's "Andrew the Hebridian," Lezay-Marnesia describes the progress of a single French immigrant couple in western Pennsylvania. Having built their own farm, however, the wife returns to France and brings over others, moving toward the type of colony described in the second letter. On deciding that Anglo-Americans would make poor colonists, he comments: "Eternal imitators of the English, to whom they remain constantly inferior, it seems that for all Americans there is but a single plan, more or less extensive, according to which all houses are built—banal and with little comfort" (112).

Lezay-Marnesia wrote well aware of the long shadow cast by Crevecouer's *Letters from an American Farmer*, in its multiple English and French iterations between 1782 and 1787. Moreover, Chateaubriand, Chevalier, and, of course, Tocqueville would likewise address many of the same subjects with far greater range and a broader sense of the new nation. Nevertheless, Lezay-Marnesia's voices should not be lost in their cacophony, and Hoffmann's and Singerman's restoration represents the standard of excellent archival and analytical scholarship needed as we continue to reinvent early American studies. In summary, *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* will have lasting value not for the comprehensive or coherent critique of democracy in America, but more directly for its idiosyncratic and fascinating tracking of the abject failure of aristocracy in America.