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Ashley Hales

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distance?’: Spectatorship,
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in *Edgar Huntly*

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ASHLEY HALES

'Was it proper to watch him at a distance?': Spectatorship, Sympathy and Atlantic Migration in *Edgar Huntly*

In an anonymous emigration guide from Britain to America, published as *Letters on Emigration* in 1794—five years before Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Edgar Huntly*—the self-styled 'gentleman lately returned from America', wrote these words:

On a survey of...[Vermont], the Emigrant perceives, that he could not possibly purchase any establishment that would suit him, without giving up every hope of adequate society. True, he has relinquished that of Europe; but he is not therefore prepared to associate with those, whose thoughts are little elevated beyond the attainment of a moderate subsistence, and whose ideas are as wild as the woods that surround them.¹

The author's description of the emigrant having 'relinquished... Europe' but yet being unable to 'associate with those... whose ideas are as wild as the woods', encapsulates a gap of sympathy that is unique to emigrants, their texts, and American literature of the period. I would like to suggest that the emigrant guide is one of the first representations of a transatlantic hybrid text.² The text just quoted is part of the retrospectively labelled genre of the emigration guide, many of which are located in the National Library of Scotland. These guides, which purport to be merely for the amusement of friends and family, were published within their author's lifetime and usually in London; the author-figure is as diverse as the texts themselves—oftentimes he is an emigrant (and it is largely always a 'he'), a traveller, a gentleman, or a back-migrant. Whatever their authors' pretensions to literary fame, the emigrant guide has a very practical purpose and textually functions to bridge the gap of transatlantic sympathy, hoping to facilitate a connection between those on both sides of the Atlantic around a discourse of emigration. In this