

Stay or Leave?

Family Survival Tactics during the Age of Emigrations, 1770-1830s

Interdisciplinary Workshop at the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften of Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Bad Homburg v.d.H. // 24-26 July 2025

Organization:

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During the Age of Revolutions (c. 1770-1830), Europe and the Americas were convulsed by a wave of interrelated political upheavals, social protests, slave rebellions, and wars. Republican alternatives to monarchies proliferated, even as colonial wars and abolitionist insurrections shook even the most entrenched empires. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people found themselves displaced and dispersed across the Atlantic world. While some chose to leave out of political or religious principle, others were forced out by some combination of ideological persecution, economic dislocation, and armed conflict. Wherever they ended up, the uprooted were forced to negotiate foreign and often hostile cultures and asylum practices.

While this momentous epoch has inspired much study, scholars have only recently drawn attention to the fact that the Age of Revolutions was also, inextricably, an age of both emigration (see, among others, Polasky 2023; Diaz 2021; Pestel 2019; Jansen 2018; Carpenter 2015; Jasanoff 2010) and re-migration (Summers 2024; Middelhoff 2021). Migrants were predominantly male, and have been studied as such, but they often brought or left behind networks of dependents including female relations, minors, servants and friends. Indeed, the navigation of gender norms and family relations were integral parts of the exilic experience. Drawing together historians and scholars of the literary, visual, and musical arts, this workshop aims to shed light on the least-visible members of these diasporas—women, children and servants—and to develop interdisciplinary perspectives on familial constellations of exile.

The following non-exhaustive list of questions relating to gender, social status and migration may serve as a guide for discussion:

- Whether they stayed at home or accompanied their husbands, fathers, employers or guardians abroad, what strategies did women of different social classes and education levels develop to support themselves and their emigrant family members in the revolutionary diaspora? How did they access and contribute to charitable networks and navigate rapidly shifting policies relating to divorce, property and inheritance seizures, residency proofs, and compensation claims?
- What role did servants and close family friends play in the decision to remain in or leave one's home amidst socio-political upheaval?

- How did women demonstrate resilience (emotional, financial, legal, and otherwise) and improvisation skills over the course of their families' exiles and/or separations?
- What role did women play in organizing the logistics and in some cases the legal reprieves (i.e., bureaucratic re-classifications, political amnesties, etc.) needed for their male relatives to return?
- How did women of different generations make sense of their exilic experiences as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and/or servants? What sorts of historical evidence allow us to appreciate their perspectives and contributions?
- How can we investigate the experiences of children and other dependents within the family unit in the context of (forced) migration? How did they impact family decisions?
- How was female agency in exile shaped by enslavement and liberation?
- How did kinship and the preservation of the household (including dependents such as women, servants, and minors but also non-human actors such as animals and pets) operate under the conditions of exile?
- How did women, children and other kin feature in literature and the visual arts in terms of representing (r)emigration? Which aesthetic techniques and narrative strategies did authors and artists use to reconfigure the experiences of families and the politics of family life in exile?

Abstracts for talks of 30 minutes max. should be sent to middelhoff@em.uni-frankfurt.de (cc: summersk5@macewan.ca and friedemann.pestel@uni-tuebingen.de) by 10 December 2024. Please provide an abstract of max. 1 DIN A4 page and short CV (preferably in a single file). Accepted presenters will be notified by the end of the year.

The workshop will take place at the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften of the Goethe University in the Villa Reimers in Bad Homburg v. d. Höhe (<https://www.forschungskolleg-humanwissenschaften.de/index.php/en/>). Accommodation costs will be covered; travel funds might be available if needed. The conference will be conducted primarily in English; a publication of the contributions is planned.

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