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Martin BrÃ¼ckner. *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. ix + 276 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5672-7.

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Mapping Early American Identities Historians have long identified ways in which early Americans shaped their identities in response to the land. From Thomas Jefferson's writings on Virginia and Puritan screeds about the wilderness to William Bartram's musings on a southeastern river system and Henry David Thoreau's self-fashioning in response to the Walden woods, colonists and early Americans found a mainspring of identity in the physical earth and its distinctive characteristics. According to this familiar narrative, Americanness was created in direct response to the landscape. The rugged American self emerged out of a Turnerian confrontation with the savagery of the wilderness landscape, and the transcendental American self was fashioned in response to the sublime and pastoral image of an American garden. Martin Brückner calls this collection of interpretations the "contextual" approach to American historical geography, an approach that will be familiar to all American historians.

But if historians are accustomed to theories about how landscape shaped American identity in early America, Brückner's new book finds a key source of American identity not in Americans' encounters with the land, but in their creations of and interactions with geographical writings–maps, plats, surveys, and geography textbooks. Rather than Jefferson and Bartram, then, the protagonists of this book include figures like Jedidiah Morse, Joshua Hempstead, and Charles Brockden Brown, whose geographical textbooks, land surveys, and fictional geographies are sites where Brückner explores how the writing of geography and spreading of geographical literacy shaped individual and collective identities in early America.

As his "starting point," Brückner takes the following premise: "That in theory and practice the construction of the American subject was grounded in the textual experience of geography" (p. 6). The reasonableness of this premise stems from the observation that the colonial period and the early Republic were eras when geographical texts, formerly produced by and available to a rather small audience of elites, were now produced and consumed widely throughout American society. The texts of geography became "an everyday language" with which Americans "not only spoke and wrote about each other but came to symbolically represent themselves" (pp. 13-14). Like other burgeoning forms of print culture–newspapers, books, pamphlets–geographies, maps, and plats were everywhere. But even more than these other textual forms, geographies and maps were centrally charged with *locating* early Americans in relation to space and each other, making geography a starting point for many early Americans' contemplations of who they were as individuals and as a nation. As Americans read and learned from surveying manuals, maps, and geographical literature, "geographic literacy enabled British Americans to quite literally get their feet on the ground, granting them a sense of place and entitlement" (p. 14). Indeed, the ability to read and understand geographical texts became a "literacy" on which other textual literacies were based. Skills from the nonverbal literacy of geography, such as grids and mnemonic devices, became fundamental to the acquisition of alphabetic literacy in early American schoolhouses. Further, geographies were often the texts used by educators for teaching their pupils to read texts. Geography was, in many ways, the most important literacy of the period.

If geographical texts created an "everyday language," however, what messages were communicated through this language? Here, Brückner begins from another premise, one that has reshaped histories of cartography since the pioneering work of J. B. Harley. As Harley pointed out in essays now collected in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (2002), maps are not neutral and objective descriptions of land, but representations and instruments of power. For Mar-

tin, geographical texts tell stories; they are works of the imagination, "a creative art" (p. 19). When a surveyor put pen to paper or a schoolboy memorized the location of early American cities, they were doing more than merely accounting facts about the land. They were entering into a literary mode that allowed them to position themselves and explore "the relationship between property and identity, colony and empire" (p. 19). Treating scientific discourses like geodesy and surveying as works of the imagination, Brückner's approach allows him to deconstruct geographies, and to read hidden intentions and meanings into the symbolic language of these texts. But the result is far more subtle than the politically edged writings of many historical geographers. Brückner does indeed reveal how maps and geographies empowered and justified various political and imperial projects, such as American independence and the marginalization of Indian peoples. But the more surprising and subtle insights come when he shows how geographic writing allowed colonial and early Americans to think through their status as colonists, then Americans, then imperialists.

The analysis moves from the 1690s through the 1820s, and one of the lasting contributions of this book will surely be in Brückner's periodization for early American geographical writings. In the first phase, geography was a means for Americans to assert their own legitimacy as imperial subjects and landowners through their creation of cadastral surveys and plats. In the second phase, maps and geographical textbooks gave integrity and coherence to a formerly inchoate colonial American physical and social landscape. Creating both a "continental" identity and an American "character," geographical works provided the revolutionary generation and their postcolonial successors a legitimate geographic location from which to construct a unified community and distinct American nation. In the final phase, geographical writings recast the land again in ways that allowed for imperial imaginings, as new geographical writings suggested a novel logic of territorial expansion. Throughout this entire history, Brückner brings together a fascinating and diverse wealth of literature. The result is a scholarly one-two punch: Brückner unearths geographical themes and activities in such unexpected places as primers, novels, portraits, and material culture, in addition to the standard sources like maps, plats, and geographies. He then sets about analyzing these far-flung materials in a well-organized, creative, and daring way. If his analyses sometimes stretch his evidence beyond belief, the sheer wealth and variety of material leaves the reader convinced of Brückner's thesis about the centrality of geography and geographical literacy in the creation of early American identity.

A strength of Brückner's analysis is his demonstration that geography was a widespread literacy, rather than an elite discourse, throughout the period under investigation. The 1690s witnessed an explosion in plat and cadastral land surveying throughout the British Atlantic world, as imperial officials tried to make the landscape "legible." While in England this emphasis on mapmaking and surveying was a rather exclusive project, owing to the limited number of people in England who owned land, American landownership was widespread. This meant that plat surveys and the discourses of geography were relevant to a broad audience in the American context.

Brückner, therefore, interprets works like John Love's 1688 surveying manual *Geodasia* as popular works of literacy, the kind of books that went into many editions and created a widespread discourse. From such popular manuals, Americans across the landowning classes from William Byrd and Hempstead to George Washington became literate in geography, and they fundamentally defined their individual statuses in the empire through the act of surveying their own individual plots of land. Americans were, therefore, already unusually versed in geography when the imperial crisis of the 1760s arrived. When it did, geography became a key means by which they created a shared *collective* identity as Americans.

Brückner's analysis of the uses of geography for nation building is a powerful part of the book. He argues that cartography, in particular the image of continental America found on maps, was a source from which Americans derived their collective identity and found a voice to express it. Brückner shows how the geographical image of the American continent, circulated primarily in wall maps and atlases, became the basis for a shared notion of homeland for the rebelling colonists. His analysis, here, traces colonial maps in two phases. Examining early maps, Brückner finds the American continent as indistinct, missing major pieces, and generally incomplete–hardly the kind of image that could serve as a basis for a collective identity. Further, reading the cartouches of prerevolutionary maps, Brückner identifies the motif of what he calls the silent Indian. Trapped in the cartouche, these Indians remained "voiceless," a symbol of America's inability to join the larger conversation within the Atlantic world. By the second phase, the geographical understanding shifted. America is now a continent and a

place from which American oratory can be staged, unlike the confining cartouches and indistinct continental forms of previous geographical understandings. As Brückner concludes, the image of the continent reversed Americans' previous silence: "By speaking from the space of the continent, colonial speakers made the map an expression of both individual and collective identity" (p. 95).

If colonists used maps to create a collective identity from scratch, in the early national period, geography had to meet the challenge of holding the nation together and building unity. For this project, geographical discourse seemed more stable than other forms of literacy, especially in an age when many intellectuals and educators distrusted the English language–and even the alphabet–as a basis for the new American identity. While Noah Webster tried to standardize a distinctive national American vernacular language, mapmakers provided their own discourse that perhaps more effectively created and pronounced the idea of American unity. Brückner finds this theme in many places, from Morse's geography textbook to portraiture and many atlases, all of which served a vital cultural function in the creation of American unity. While writings such as Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784) emphasized localism, the new national map found in diverse geographical texts produced a "map-as-logo" that counteracted the discourse of local difference and emphasized unity more powerfully than alphabetical reform and linguistic discourse really could.

Geographical textbooks served a similar function, but offered readers a chance to take a tour of the national landscape and discover "typical" American characters, not regional types. For many readers of geography textbooks (which, next to bibles and Webster's books, were the most popular literary productions of the age), the exploration of this new national geography was a formative experience in self-identification as American. Through a combination of maps, encyclopedic descriptions of geographical features, and exploration of typical American characters, the geography textbooks created a site for learning and imagining what it was to be American.

But while geography provided a metaphor for unity, there were ways in which geographic discourses revealed instability in the American identity. In a fascinating chapter about the geographic themes in the work of early American novelists like Brown, Brückner reveals how geographic discourse intruded on the novel in the form of geography-obsessed characters, such as the title character in Jane Talbot, whose love of maps and armchair exploration walled her off from the world. Even more consequentially, Brückner shows how Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were paralyzed when they had to rely on maps made by Mandan Indian guides as they attempted to reach the Pacific Ocean. Disoriented, the explorers came face to face with the tenuous reliability of geographic texts and found themselves in the uncomfortable position of what Brückner calls a kind of "discursive subordination," their own geographical understandings "invaded and colonized" by foreign meanings (p. 226). In the final chapter, territorial expansion in the 1820s also seems to threaten the stable geographic conception of America when the old stable image (America's "map-as-logo") begins to change shape. But, here, geographers provided Americans with a new conception of a shifting and flexible national geography, one that allowed expansion as a major theme.

This is a fine book, brimming with creative ideas and surprising insights. It should find a large audience among cultural historians of early America, and it will be important reading for students interested in questions of identity in early America. A growing theme of research, colonial and early American *identity* has a burgeoning scholarship and is the organizing theme for many conferences and volumes. The scholarship in this growing field, like Brückner's analysis, is chasing an elusive historical object–identity–which lies somewhere in the nexus of personal psychology, politics, and culture. Scholars necessarily push evidence hard when they seek this fugitive phenomenon, and in this book, Brückner strikes a good interpretive balance between what the evidence can tell and what the scholar can imagine. Sometimes, he pushes too far, however, as when he asserts a subliminal meaning for a text, or attributes symbolic weight to a dubious line or font on a map. One example of Brückner's stretching tendency comes when he analyzes a group of words assembled in an 1801 geography and handwriting manual. These words, which included "bind, kill, blood, band, kill, brood," suggest for Brückner an "obvious" violent and thus imperial connotation, and speak to an emergent imperial identity expressed in this handwriting book's pages (p. 261). Brückner, thus, concludes that the book contained a hidden "ideological exercise," helping Americans invent imperial identities for themselves at the beginning of an expansionary period (p. 261). Such a reading is not implausible, but it seems just as likely that what was being "exercised" in this 1801 text was not imperialist ideology, but rather cursive letters with lots of loops–"l"s and "o"s and "d"s. It was a handwriting book after all!

If this criticism speaks to Brückner's occasional over-interpretation of evidence, there are also moments when

the reader wonders if he did not miss some potentially fruitful avenues of interpretation. Specifically, absent from Brückner's analysis of the creation of the American self through geography is much investigation of the wider Atlantic context, particularly the competing geographies of empire proposed by Anglo-American imperial rivals in New France and New Spain. While I am convinced by Brückner's thesis that the marginal representation of America as a "silent Indian" in eighteenth-century maps "threatened" the American colonists' position within the British Atlantic, the greater threat to American subjectivity in 1740 and through much of the rest of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was surely the alternative imperial geography that claimed large portions of the American continent for France and Spain (p. 77). If Lewis and Clark were dismayed by the instability of the Native American maps that they used, what did early Americans make of maps that proposed alternative boundaries for their supposedly stable domains? Some readers of H-Atlantic might wish that the author had considered some of these competing geographic texts that surely existed in the wider Atlantic and might have affected an emerging Anglo-American identity throughout the period.

These concerns do not take away from Brückner's impressive achievements, however, which will be appreciated by a wide audience. Indeed, as more scholars continue to pursue early American identities and the texts through which they were expressed, Brückner's scholarship will chart a useful course for others to follow. Even when Brückner occasionally stretches too far, taking his reader off safe and convincing interpretive landscapes, he does not lose his compass. The result is a book that maps an important new territory with a creative, important thesis.

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