

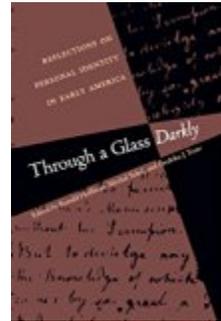
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, Fredrika J. Teute, eds. *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 464 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4644-5; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2336-1.

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Given all the energy modern Americans spend on trying to figure out themselves and each other, it is surprising that historians have only recently begun to apply some of the insights thus gained to the history of early America. The essays in this volume suggest that such efforts are every bit as engaging as reading about psychotherapy or watching Oprah. More importantly, they provide vital insights not only into early America, but into our own troubled times. The “glass darkly” referred to in the title is, after all, a mirror.

“With all the attention given to the discovery of the other,” writes Richard White, “it was only a matter of time before historians returned to the discovery of self. Since otherness presumes and demands a self, discovering or creating others implies discovering or creating oneself. Using encounters with the other as an avenue for examining colonial self-fashioning has a nice logic to it” (404). And so it does. All of the essays in this book deal in one way or another with self-identity in early America. Significantly, as Greg Dening points out in one of several introductions, these new inner worlds all “turn around some experience of otherness” (5).

The book is divided into three sections. In the first, scholars “read” people’s actions for clues to their personal identities and their attempts at creating spaces in which they, in Greg Dening’s phrase, “would not be other at all” (10). James H. Merrell, Mary Beth Norton, T.H. Breen, Alan Taylor, and Donna Merwick use the vehicle of micro-history to discuss in depth the process of identity formation. Along the way they enlighten us about, respectively, mixed-race identity, gender-bending, rape and theft, murder, and suicide.

In part two, scholars analyze what the editors call “texts of self.” Mechal Sobel through dreams; Rhys Isaac through ballads, folk tales and diaries; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich through cupboards; and Kenneth A. Lockridge through commonplace books—all illuminate how different groups of early Americans went about creating identities for themselves and the extent to which gender and race informed their efforts.

In the third and last part of the book, Philip Greven, Elaine Forman Crane, Richard White and W. Jeffrey Bolster examine what ideas about child rearing; the experience of pain; Indian-French encounters on the middle ground; and the self-fashioning of black sailors can tell us about identity and society in early America.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most authors draw more heavily than is customary for historians on theoretical work in other fields; anthropology, philosophy, psychology, material culture, theatre, literary theory, and critical theory inform these essays. The ultimate question most authors engage, whether explicitly or implicitly, is, as Mechal Sobel puts it, to what extent “racial and gender inequality is part of the essence of modernity” (172). It is this question which marks the importance of the book for our own time. We have only just begun to plumb the extent to which a racialized and gendered Other is at the heart of American culture. These essays impress upon us the urgency of such explorations, in the past and the present.

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