



**Bethany Wiggin.** *Babel of the Atlantic*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 336 pp. \$96.65, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-08323-0.

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The rise in interest in the study of multilingualism across myriad academic disciplines from cognitive science to historical sociolinguistics has forced scholars to revisit, and, often, reevaluate multilingualism in specific contexts. In this spirit, Bethany Wiggin's edited volume, *Babel of the Atlantic*, investigates the role of multilingualism in the colonial Mid-Atlantic. The very existence of this volume challenges the common myth that the colonial Mid-Atlantic was an English-only space and enables scholars from diverse backgrounds to gain an increased understanding of historical developments through the lens of a multilingual society. One of the primary results is to replace the notion of rigid boundaries between languages and those who spoke with more fluid and dynamic borders—both within North America and across the Atlantic.

Wiggin's introductory chapter sets the stage and provides the scholarly context for the book's essays. Geographically, this volume homes in on Philadelphia and the surrounding area, including Germantown, Bethlehem, and so-called Indian Country to the west. Wiggin also introduces a second unifying theme, the historical value of multilingualism. Instead of viewing multilingualism as a potential societal confound that leads to confusion and strife, she argues that the variety of languages was a *bonum* to be celebrated. Fittingly,

the volume embraces interdisciplinarity. As Wiggin correctly asserts, "To recover the hum and whirl of voices speaking in various languages who talked, laughed, argued, and not infrequently tried to silence one another permanently in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, this volume draws a variety fields of historical research into conversation" (p. 5). The contents of this volume are partitioned in four primary themes ("New World, New Religions," "The Languages of Education and Established Religions," "The Languages of Race and (Anti-)Slavery," and "The Languages of Wood and Stone"), which I discuss in the order they appear in the volume.

In the first chapter, Patrick M. Erben makes use of the Tower of Babel analogy to capture and classify the conflict over language in Philadelphia's Charity School in the mid-eighteenth century. In his own words, the intent of this essay is to attend to "the often-neglected issue of language unity, difference, multiplicity, and confusion at the center of the debate" (p. 43). Erben draws upon the tyrannical rebel and confounder in the Tower of Babel story, King Nimrod, to make the case that certain key political figures and institutions thwarted unity and security for all inhabitants of the area. The central focus of debate involves a publication skirmish between factions lining up behind Christoph Saur and Benjamin

Franklin. Although Saur's opponents initially charged him with acting "wie ein Nimrod," after careful reanalysis Erben reverses the label to apply to Franklin and his allies. According to Erben, Franklin's Charity School movement could be viewed as "an oppressive, imperialist regime governed by Anglophone and orthodox religious beliefs" (p. 43). The promotion of "an oppressive type of bilingualism" that "functioned as tools of coercion and imperial reeducation" did more to divide than unite Philadelphians (pp. 56, 60).

Promoting multilingualism requires the additional acknowledgment that linguistic and cultural boundaries can and should be overcome. Craig Atwood argues that "the social and religious life of Moravian religious communities represented an implicit and at times explicit challenge to the norms of the early modern period" (p. 77). Multilingualism joined other Moravian characteristics, including ecumenism, female spirituality with its challenge to traditional gender roles, and work among enslaved and indigenous populations. Atwood's thesis that "the Moravians believed that they were overcoming the curse of the Tower of Babel through multilingualism" delivers a description of this religious community who in action and doctrine—especially with their earlier, more radical stances—seriously challenged established societal norms (p. 89). Katherine Faull's chapter extends the argument, proposing that the Moravians also embraced multilingualism as part of their progressive understanding of women's missionary service. For Moravian women missionaries, the 1740s and 1750s marked a period of "positive gender bias toward women in which women missionaries navigated the ethnographic and geographic frontiers with more agency than they would in the 1770s after Zinzendorf's death" (p. 102–3).

The second section turns to address languages of education and established religions, beginning with Jürgen Overhoff's treatment of multilingualism in the 1749 establishment of the

"Publick Academy in the City of Philadelphia," which was later to be known as University of Pennsylvania. This piece casts Benjamin Franklin's role in a more positive light than Erben's earlier chapter. Although Franklin certainly helped define the curriculum of the Philadelphia Academy, he was not alone in his endeavors, since from its outset the board of trustees consisted of twenty-four men with distinct backgrounds and ideas about education. Overhoff highlights that from its inception students "were strongly encouraged to study English, German, French, and Spanish, those being the most important of the modern European languages spoken on the North American continent" (p. 132). Classic languages, such as Greek and Latin, were purportedly "not cherished in the same way," which can be taken to reflect the nuances of multilingualism in the academy (p. 132).

Historian Wolfgang Flügel's contribution brings to light an omnipresent issue facing multilingual communities; namely, should institutions composed of multilinguals persist in using the language of the homeland in religious services and other public functions, or should they shift to the dominant language of the new society? Flügel documents and discusses this complex and thorny issue faced by Lutheran pastors in Pennsylvania between the years of 1742 and 1780. The primary questions raised in this contribution (p. 149) are quite similar to those (historical) sociolinguists continue to confront in their research. Additionally, the question which language(s) should be used in which domain(s) can be understood as another instance of support for the importance and relevance of diachronic language shift.

The third section of this volume confronts the sensitive issue of the languages of race and (anti)slavery. The contributions in this section are an important reminder of the complex narratives of race (and racism) within multilingual and multiethnic communities, accompanied by the fact that these debates were often conducted in lan-

guages other than English. Katherine Gerbner takes a closer look at the struggle Quakers encountered in their approach to slavery in the New World. In her essay she contends that “the German and Dutch authors of the Germantown protest introduced a new perspective on slaveholding to an English and Welsh Quaker community that was in the midst of its own struggle to reconcile slavery with the Quaker peace testimony” (p. 177). Ultimately, the Quakers associated with the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting opposed the slave trade due to fear of disorder and rebellion on the part of the slaves and not “humanitarian reasons” (p. 191).

Birte Pflieger explores Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg’s declining emphasis on the importance of salvation of those of African descent between 1742 and 1784. Based primarily on Muhlenberg’s journal writings, Pflieger shows that Muhlenberg’s early criticism of slavery and belief that the enslaved were of higher moral standard gave way to an acceptance of slavery. In his later journal entries, Muhlenberg referred to slaves as “Neger Sclaven,” which he continued to write in Latin script (which is a sign that this lexical item was still likely a “foreign term” to him linguistically). Pflieger summarizes that “the shift in Muhlenberg’s assessment of Africans, African Americans, and slavery typifies the general change in many eighteenth-century German-speakers’ attitude toward the enslavement of black people” (p. 201). By the end of this century, the gulf between the Christian and (purported) heathen represented a significant gulf in the minds of most Germans in Lutheran and Reformed Church congregations. An interesting ancillary thesis and discussion concerns how the Germans came to be viewed as “white” by their Anglo-peers during this time, an achievement that negatively affected African American Pennsylvanians.

The final chapter of this section, written by Maurice Jackson, focuses on the writings and missionary efforts of the French-born polyglot Antho-

ny Benezet. Although the audience of his writings was predominantly white, Benezet drew upon myriad multilingual sources in “his lifelong campaign for educational opportunities for and the enfranchisement of African people across the Atlantic world” (p. 7). His legacy is noticeable in the influence that his writings and missionary work had on other contemporary scholars and theologians. John’s Wesley’s *Thoughts on Slavery* (1774), for example, “is based almost entirely on Benezet’s *Some Historical Observations of Guinea*” (p. 238).

The fourth and final section of papers in this volume serves as a reminder of the influence that “a European cosmopolitan colonial Atlantic culture” had in shaping cultural norms manifest in “material cultural artifacts” (p. 7). The inclusion of this section pushes the traditional boundaries of traits what we commonly attribute to “language,” demonstrating that these elements have the potential to leave more permanent tangible elements of cultural expression. Cynthia G. Falk engages in a detailed analysis of the home of David Deshler, whose two-story house in Germantown was occupied by George Washington in 1782. Falk’s work establishes “the importance of non-verbal communication in early America” through the “visual and tactile statements” which “had the potential to supplement other types of communication” (p. 251). Falk’s treatment of the Deshler home highlights how “material messages ... have the potential to be long-lasting,” opening the door for interesting future studies that connect the role of symbolic architecture and cultural transitions (p. 252).

Lisa Minardi concludes this section and the volume with her piece focusing on how “being German in colonial Pennsylvania” carried “multiple meanings” (p. 277). Minardi explores two groups of furniture made in or near Philadelphia and the architecture of two of Philadelphia’s colonial-era Lutheran churches, arguing that the adaptation of design norms established in the Old

World showed a flare that clearly marked a stylistic evolution.

Overall, the volume is successful in exposing the hidden and often underappreciated role that multilingualism played in colonial Philadelphia and its surrounds. Interpreting complex transatlantic networks and cultural change through the lens of multilingual and multicultural societies forces scholars from different disciplines and traditions to collaborate to achieve a more comprehensive, panoramic assessment of these developments. These concerted efforts reveal the complex, sometimes contradictory part that certain key figures such as Benjamin Franklin played in the establishment of societal and linguistic norms. Although this volume can indeed be viewed as a successful trailblazer in most regards, the absence of scholars of linguistics—especially scholars whose expertise lies primary in the field of historical sociolinguistics—in these collaborative investigations is a noted shortcoming that must be addressed in future volumes of this sort.

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