Modernity Travels with the Other in the American Colonies

*Modernity and Its Other* is essential reading for historians of the French and British North American colonies as well as scholars interested in the intellectual, political, and economic currents of the Atlantic world. Robert Woods Sayre’s in-depth examination of Franco-American and Anglo-American travel literature by authors like François-Xavier de Charlevoix, John Lawson, and William Bartram provides readers with new insights into many well-used primary sources. He argues that Euro-American writers described the European-Indigenous encounter through the contrasting ideals of the emerging capitalist market economies of Europe and its American colonies, in other words, modernity, with the premodern non-capitalist Indigenous peoples of North America, in other words, the Other. Sayre envisions this dichotomy as a contrast between “ideal types’ in the Weberian sense,” which take a number of forms in these travel accounts, for example, “qualitative values ... honor” versus the more quantitative “exchange value,” “intimacy with the natural world” versus “exploitation” of it, and even the “supernatural” versus. the “rationalistic” (pp. 7-9). Sayre also posits a paradox for this dichotomy where “the ‘savages’ are in fact more ‘civilized’ than those who designate themselves such,” with some Euro-Americans lamenting the loss of “the qualitative, moral values” of Europe’s “traditional heritage” to the “quantitative, commercial values of its modernity” (pp. 302-3). This paradox leads into a secondary thread running throughout Sayre’s work but one that he only elucidates fully in his conclusion, in which he contrasts these textual sources in the context of the evolution of Enlightenment thought and Romanticism. He highlights strains of Enlightenment thinking, with the first more “rationalist tendency” open to retaining some aspects of the premodern, while the second more “whiggish tendency” sought the elimination of it (p. 305). With Romanticism, however, Sayre found “a special link ... and openness towards the Amerindian” (p. 304). Thus, with this secondary thread Sayre again contrasts the modern with premodern through the ideas swirling around the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

Sayre divides his work into two parts, first examining French views of Anglo-American modernity, and then Franco-American and Anglo-American views of the premodern Indigenous Other in contrast to this modernity. In his first part, “Views of Modernity: Internal/External Discovery,” he uses literary works by Saint-John de Crèvecoeur,
Philip Freneau, and Moreau de Saint-Méry to examine the emergence of modernity in the eighteenth-century British colonies before, during, and after the American Revolution. Using literature by French and French Creole authors who lived or traveled through parts of the British colonies/United States enables Sayre to bring an insider—Euro-American—view on the emerging market-based capitalist society, but a view written by people also partially outside of this Anglo-American world. Although these three chapters are not groundbreaking, Sayre uses these French sources deftly to reinforce the work of historians like James Henretta and Gordon Wood on the dynamically changing eighteenth-century economic, political, and social milieu of the Anglo-American colonies/newly independent United States. The highlight of these chapters—indeed the book as a whole—is how Sayre contextualizes his sources through his “specific sociocultural profile of travelers” (p. 15). This discussion of the details of these travelers’ lives and influences explores both the person and their work. Through these works, then, Sayre explores how these observers at times found positives in the modernity of Anglo-Americans, but also at times longed for the premodern, often represented by their depictions of Native Americans.

For his second part, “Views of the Other: Travels in ‘Indian Territory,’” Sayre examines Franco-American and Anglo-American travel accounts through Native American lands. These authors included Louis-Armand de Lom d’Arce, baron de Lahontan, François-Xavier de Charlevoix, John Lawson, Jonathan Carver, William Bartram, Alexander Mackenzie, and Jean-Baptiste Trudeau. Sayre mines this varied travel literature to demonstrate how these individuals recorded numerous observations about Native Americans and used such observations to comment on the emerging modernity of British America. The bulk of French accounts come from before the Seven Years’ War and the French loss of most of their North American empire, albeit French Canadian Trudeau’s account takes place after this war, whereas the British accounts tend to start a little later in the eighteenth century and continue to the century’s end. While the majority of part 2 (chapters 5 through 8) focuses in depth on these authors and their accounts of encounters with Native Americans, chapter 4 first surveys other eighteenth-century literatures, including captivity narratives, journals by military peoples, histories, and novels and poems, to introduce what Sayre terms the ‘zero degree’ of contact” often present in such works (p. 22). For instance, using two lengthy examples, the military journal of Thomas Morris and the captivity account of Alexander Henry, Sayre argues that such encounter accounts frequently included “confrontation, misunderstanding, rejection, and hatred” with a focus on violence and thus little actual cultural understanding (p. 101). He then contrasts these “zero degree” writings with travel accounts that included “free travel in territories controlled by Indians,” which he suggests often portrayed “meaningful contact on the sociocultural plane” (p. 299).

Once again, it is Sayre’s “specific sociocultural profile of travelers” that is the highlight of part 2, in particular his treatment of Craver and Bartram (p. 15). Sayre dedicates the second half of chapter 6 to Carver, including an insightful comparison among Carver’s original manuscript journal from his expedition through the western Great Lakes and northern Mississippi Valley with later manuscript revisions and the eventual Travels through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768 (1778). In particular, Sayre discusses “a series of textual revisions” to demonstrate Carver’s shift from “providing a report” to his desire to “appeal to a broad public” (pp. 184, 187). Sayre argues that Carver’s public-appealing “construction of adventure” in his published version led to near “zero degree” of meaningful cultural information on Native Americans (p. 188). Sayre then devotes the entirety of chapter 7 to Bartram, his life and family background, various strains of eighteenth-century Quakerism, and his explorations throughout the American South. He again compares the
surviving parts of Bartram’s original manuscript to the published *Travels* (1791), unpacking places where Bartram “expresses a romantic revolt against ... modernity” and thus his “identification with the Indian Other” (p. 234). Throughout his first and second parts, Sayre’s strength remains this intricate discussion of both the travelers and their textual sources in connection with his examination of the titular *Modernity and Its Other*.

Altogether, Sayre succeeds in developing this eighteenth-century textual encounter between an emerging capitalist market economy and a pre-modern non-capitalist one. He is not as successful, however, at bringing together fully this transition to capitalism in the North American colonies with the Native American world. Indeed, in his introduction he notes that these historiographies “rarely come together” (p. 10). Still, he points out the possibilities, because this “new market society was firmly rooted in agriculture, which depended on the expropriation of Indian lands” (p. 5). Indeed, few historical studies reference Karl Polanyi, Max Weber, Carl Degler, James Henretta, and Gordon Wood with Theda Perdue, Susan Sleeper-Smith, Nancy Shoemaker, Neil Salisbury, and Alan Taylor in just a handful of opening pages. Yet, after bringing up this fascinating possibility that links ideas, economies, and peoples across the Atlantic world in his introduction, much of his book remains rooted firmly on the Euro-American side. While his preface acknowledges that his “book is not about ... Native Americans per se,” it does seem like a missed opportunity, especially as this 2017 English-language edition is a translation and expansion of Sayre’s original 2008 French-language version (p. xii). While Sayre added material to chapters 3 and 8, along with an epilogue on the travels and works of nineteenth-century American George Catlin, he could have integrated more fully the last decade of ethnohistorical historiography, rather than merely gesturing at it in his introduction. Still, what remains is an engaging eighteenth-century history of the contested emergence of modernity and capitalism in the North American colonies told through primary source travel literature that historians often use for its ethnohistorical content.