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Locating Early America

On a trip to Mexico City a few years back, I made the requisite pilgrimage to the *Museo Nacional de Antropología*. Actually I went twice, first as part of an NEH summer seminar focused on *Aztlán*, the mythico-historic homeland of the Aztec people, then a second time on my own, to understand how stories of nationhood use a native subject. The *Museo Nacional*, which opened in the 1960s, showcases treasures from across Mexico, although the floor plan clearly favors the *Sala Azteca* -- the room devoted to *Tenochtitlan*, the empire sacked by Hernan Cortés and the spongy foundation of today's capital city.

Most of the museum has two floors, the first to showcase historic artifacts and the second (less-trafficked) floor for ethnography. But the *Sala Azteca* has no second story.

Tenochtitlan, by architectural logic, lives within a timeless

present. Gray granite walls stretch from floor to ceiling. High on the inside wall, selections of Nahuatl poetry, translated into Spanish, admonish: "This is your glory / This is your mandate / hold these principles to the present / and never forget them." The famed Calendar Stone, set alongside a photograph of Porfirio Díaz, looms over the center-rear third of the room. One has to wait to snap a picture in front of the Calendar Stone; it is a national icon, endlessly reproduced, purchasable in gift shops from Cancún to Juarez, long featured on the deep green jerseys of Mexico's perennially disappointing football squad. The *Sala Azteca* uses one historic group to speak for a broader, unstable political unit. If the Aztec-Mexica represent all Mexico, then the capital, the heart of the *Distrito Federal*, represents an equally glorious -- if less bloody -- *Tenochtitlan*. Despite the constant ring of protest in the *Zócalo*, or statehouse square just a few miles down the *Paseo de la Reforma*, the national museum sounds a message of unity. And this political fiction starts from a map. At the threshold of the *Sala Azteca* is an inlaid floor map that outlines Mexico's present-day boundaries. As we enter the room, we step onto a white marble platform then over this graphic argument, set in black tile.

The same slip, of native for nation, recalls Barbara E. Mundy's fantastic contribution to *Early American Cartographies*,

a collection of essays that follows a 2006 Newberry Library conference. Mundy gave a keynote at that conference, and her essay here provides a model for reading maps as cultural artifacts from the colonial period through the nineteenth century and into the present. Mundy concedes that the "question of indigenous peoples" in the "national territory" falls beyond her scope, but the implicit agenda is precisely what makes her inquiry so compelling. Starting from the *Atlas geográfico ... de la República Mexicana* (1858), published after a painful territorial loss to the US, she works backward, sifting archaeologically, to recover indigenous practices. Most of the *Atlas geográfico* is devoted to the 31 Mexican states. Near the end of the volume, however, appear two indigenous texts, including the *Mapa de Sigüenza*, which chronicled the Aztec migration from *Aztlán*. On one hand, the *Atlas geográfico* and its industrial-era equivalents (exhibition halls, railroad maps, etc.) were used by Porfirio Díaz and his ilk to shore up political boundaries. On the other hand, the *Mapa de Sigüenza* and similar hand-painted *lienzos* serve as living documents, accepted in court disputes today and still used in community processions, continuing to "destabilize 'normative' history and geography" (380).

While unpacking the "ambivalent modernities" in an imagined nation (388), Mundy cites a favorite theoretical conceit of

Mesoamericanists, Michel de Certeau's "spatial stories." Place implies stability, as Certeau argued in the early 1980s; space is place in motion. As a map collates multi-valent relationships to our environs, stories reopen a "closed field of discourses" (123). With Certeau in mind, perhaps, Mundy opens her discussion of the *Atlas geográfico* in narrative mode, with the story of her own reading from graduate school to the present, and she emphasizes disruption, cooptation and change. When we define colonialism as a process, as tour rather than tableau, we set the stories within spatial containers back into motion. "What the map cuts up," Certeau wrote, "the story cuts across" (129). This act of cutting across, both time and space, should define our redrawn map of colonial letters.

Those who toil in the field known as "American Literature to 1800" are a habitually restive bunch. The flagship journal *Early American Literature*, we like to point out, stakes false temporal and spatial markers. *Early* means before the American Renaissance (before the good stuff). *America* means the US (as opposed to the broader reach from Labrador to Tierra del Fuego). And *literature* means genres not well represented in the years before 1800 (lots of sermons, fewer novels). But influences from colonial history, particularly in Atlantic Studies, loosen the field from its obligation to provide precedents, from shedding light on the dim precursors for the literature of a nation that

did not exist. Off-year conferences organized by the Society of Early Americanists, like the 2006 Newberry, draw hemispheric connections. At the forefront of this geographic realignment has been the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture; through a series of monographs, collections such as *Early American Cartographies* and scholarly editions, new texts have been introduced and familiar ones made less so. We now have, for instance, two companion works from colonial Virginia: Robert Beverley's long-overlooked *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705), introduced by Susan Scott Parrish; and *The Dividing Line Histories of William Byrd II of Westover*, by Beverley's brother-in-law, indefatigably edited by Kevin Joel Berland.

It makes sense to read these books together.

In the Introduction to *Early American Cartographies*, Martin Brückner links historical geography to colonial letters. Where map historians had framed their field as progress towards accuracy, more recent interpretations are more open-ended, breaking from "period definition and demarcated geographies" in ways that are amenable to the new early American studies (25, 26). With the expected nods to Henri Lefebvre, Certeau and J.B. Harley (whose presence saturates this volume), Brückner defines maps "as flexible spaces containing a host of mobile elements"; as containers for "spatial stories representing the various

elements and their movements"; on the side of production, read with an awareness of "cultural origins"; in reception, "as space-sensitive palimpsests reflecting multiple patterns of short- and long-durational consequence" (18). The chapters that follows resist pat summarization; this is a book one has to stew on. Still, some key themes emerge.

Center-Periphery. With "early America" no longer reduced to a proto-United States, the compass of study opens to exciting, even daunting sweeps. The lead essay, by Ricardo Padrón, expands the range of inquiry to the Philippines, showing how allegorical maps imagined the Spanish empire as one vast, transoceanic realm (53). As the "America" in British America criss-crosses the Atlantic, likewise, colonial spaces appear to emerge from court intrigue. Jess Edwards brilliantly reads John Locke, Restoration politics and the framing of North Carolina through manuscript maps. Citing geography "as a language of negotiation," Edwards shows how our understanding of Locke's famous dictum on property (that "unimproved" lands were vacant) grows more complicated alongside negotiations between Parliament, proprietors, settlers, native people and the Crown (115). Like most essays in this volume, which should blur the boundaries in undergraduate curricula, Edwards projects colony against empire and vice versa.

Collation. Given the value of cartographic knowledge, a new literature emerged, and this literature was encyclopedic, with emphasis on synthesis over originality, editing and collection over individual expression. The art of collation is defined by summarization, abridgement, allusion and omission. Ken MacMillan reviews the creation of a cultural center from Medieval maps of the Holy Land, to the 1569 Gerard Mercator map (which put Europe at the center of the world), to the digests of Richard Hakluyt and his contemporaries from the corners of an expanding empire (70-80). Cultural production from the edges became more pronounced as creole identities announced themselves. The influential map historian Matthew E. Edney focuses on the Kennebec River in Maine, and draws upon print and manuscript sources from "official, proprietary, and personal archives on both side of the Atlantic" (304) to show how local constituents envisioned a common good, in this case, a buffer against French Canada. Scott Lehmann shows how periodical maps from the London *Gentleman's Magazine* justified the British invasion of Havana. Online resources now make it easy to access multiple or serial editions, allowing scholars to trace how a colonial imaginary was digested for empire, and how colonials in turn inserted themselves into conversations that were centered somewhere else.

Local Knowledge. Imperial designs met reality. Leaders adjusted. People revolted. Drawing attention to differences

between various ethnic groups from Europe, trade networks and the invasion of Ireland, Judith Ridner explains how the municipal grid of a frontier town like Carlisle, Pennsylvania was designed to expand English and proprietary aims. But Penn's plans "did not work the way he intended" (338). Junia Ferreira Furtado argues that maps of eighteenth-century Brazil could amount to rebellion. Brückner underscores how decorative maps expressed simmering colonial discontent. Wall maps assembled from up to twenty folio sheets presumably conveyed obeisance. Such maps hung in rooms where farces were performed, however, and they became unexpected objects of parody. A 1775 British map shows the colonies of North America bursting into flames (419).

Native Epistemologies in a Non-Native World. Where creole identity provides a ready subject for study, the role of native people in an imperial geography remains difficult to place. Not only must scholars (tied to academic institutions) negotiate an epistemic divide, but painful legacies continue to inform our readings from a living present. On one hand, we have familiar theoretical positions. Gavin Hollis notes how ephemeral maps, drawn by natives, were recorded in exploration accounts. Hollis limns a hermeneutic loop: "Through the cracks in the narratives," the traces of "cartographic encounters" remain, "even if the recorders of these encounters did not" (168). Andrew Newman charts an impasse of global and local with the

Dido Motif, a story of land theft found in Virgil's *Aeneid*, in colonial settings from South Africa and Ceylon, and particular to his case, in Lenape-Leni interactions with Dutch New York. In the Dido Motif (what folklorists identify as K185.1: "Deceptive Land Purchase: the Oxhide Measure"), the colonizer asks natives for as much land as can be covered by a bullock's back; when the native party agrees, the colonizer cuts the hide into strips, then lines the strips into a circle, vastly expanding the extent of the claim. But Newman's inquiry, brilliantly researched, paints us back into the old new historicist corner: we face the same impasse between people and trope; when we set the oxhide story on a global scale, we lose a story on the ground. Still one more example from this volume, the most serious attempt to embrace a native perspective, strains the conventions of academic writing. William Gustav Gartner glosses the Skidi Sky Chart, a celestial map painted on hide that is now at Chicago's Field Museum. But the essay demands a considerable amount of context, and Gartner well exceeds the space typically allotted for a chapter in an academic volume. The "Skidi Start Chart," he contends, is "a map of all that we cartographers do not know" (202). His heroic effort says many things, not the least being the impasse between native prerogatives and repositories such as the Field Museum.

And who is this *we* in *cartographers*? How do memories of theft inform our readings of colonial texts? What did it mean then, and what does it mean today, when a white creole author such as Robert Beverley would claim:

I am an *Indian*, and don't pretend to be exact in my Language: But I hope the Plainness of my Dress, will give him the kinder Impressions of my Honesty, which is what I pretend to. (8)

Introducing Beverley's book after a long dormancy, Susan Scott Parrish emphasizes the influence of Baconian New Science, which necessitated distinctions between a Plain Truth and the fancies of fiction, not to mention how English court politics shaped the portrayal of far-off Virginia. Parrish makes a compelling case for reading Beverley as part of an "imperial transatlantic geography," not as a proto-American but as the colonial speaking to the metropole. His feigned naiveté, sartorial "plainness," performs simplicity for the London reader. The "Indian" is one who self-identifies from *over there*, bearing material objects to the imperial center.

The History and Present State of Virginia thus unfolds from a spatial bind: as Beverley portrays a colony for the metropole, the *ethos* of his account depends upon that physical presence from the margins. Four Books, or long chapters, describe a distant country that may serve English (and, of course,

Beverley's own) interests. Book One, on history, reviews ships landed and missed opportunities from Sir Walter Raleigh to the then-current administration, emphasizing how Virginia should be "rightly settled" (21). Books Two, natural history, weighs the potential of European products in America, the still-unknown fate of European nature in new climes, and the potential of untested cultivars. Book Three, on the "The Native Indian," folds prior accounts by John Smith, Louis Hennepin, Louis de Lahontan and engravings by Theodore de Bry into his own report. Beverley's role as collator becomes most conspicuous here, as he tests his predecessors against direct observation, supplementing what he has read about native religion, for instance, with an account of his own stealth into an Indian *Quioccosan*, or house of worship (154). Book Four, on "The Present State," presents a country "in a Happy Situation" (236) that wants only sound government to kindle the "Friendship, Hospitality, and Good-Neighborhood" of its people (247). The "Virginia" in *The History and Present State* is neither original nor derivative, but shaped by Atlantic currents (which, as Parrish notes, included slavery), rhetorically Indian and bodily in-between.

The Dividing Line Histories, a product of the same colonial routes, reverses the terms of Beverley's book. Where the *History and Present State* brought Virginia to England, William Byrd transports the armchair travelers to America. A 1728 boundary

settlement occasioned the work. Byrd and his fellow Virginians joined a party from North Carolina that Spring, starting at the Corrituck River on the coast and venturing through the Dismal Swamp; after breaking for the Summer, they ended their line that Fall in the foothills of the Blue Ridge. The twin reports, long read as examples of early frontier humor, were also exercises in erudition. Educated in England, a fellow of the Royal Society, from a family of politically-connected planters, Byrd filtered his experiences through conspicuous literary convention. His *Dividing Line History* combines the genres of itinerarium and natural history, while his *Secret History* reads like a restoration drama, prepared for a close circle of private readers, complete with pseudonyms and bawdy jokes. Editor Kevin Joel Berland emphasizes the "accretional" quality in Byrd's writing, the layers of sourced and unsourced allusion, and through exhaustive documentation (with footnotes that vie with the text), shows how two seasons in the backcountry were mediated through the growing library of America (xii).

Experience abuts erudition. Byrd eats wild grapes from a hat, sleeps by a waterfall (a sound that gives him "Poetical Dreams") and cultivates a taste for barbecued bear meat (413). His narrative falls between book and local knowledge. A Saponi hunter, Ned Bearskin, tells Byrd how squirrels cross a stream. The squirrel "launches a Chip or Piece of Bark into the Water,"

then holds up "his Tail to the Wind" for a makeshift sail (204). Did this explanation come from Ned Bearskin, Berland wants to know, or from other sources? A footnote traces the anecdote to the sixteenth-century Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus, leading Berland to conclude that the tail-for-a-sail account is "almost certainly not a Saponi legend" (333, n377). Stressing the accretional, the layers of existing literature from prior publications, Berland reaches a similar conclusion regarding native accounts of the Afterlife. In a moment of leisure, Bearskin describes the two paths an Indian may take after death. The good path offers ample game and "Women beautiful as stars"; the second, barren path brings women "Old & ugly arm'd with sharp Claws like a Panther," who have tongues with iron thorns "20 Cubits long" (408). The source-hungry Berland traces an analogue back to John Smith (307, n245), begging the question where does Bearskin stop and Byrd begin? In still one more example, Bearskin logs a running objection to the Virginians' practice of cooking venison and turkey in the same pot. Mixing game, the Saponi claims, will hurt future hunts. Robert Beverley would also report that natives "never serve up different sorts of Victuals in one Dish" (140). Berland's William Byrd, meanwhile, likens the Saponi custom to "Levitical Law" (145).

An overwhelming emphasis on sources, I want to say, set this edition down a tenuous path. The footnote that supplements

can also omit, and at points, Berland reads too closely from within Byrd's own library. Near the coast, for example, the author spies a "Bush of Carollina Tea call'd Japon," or yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitorium*). The fifty words on this plant prompt a footnote three times that length, with the expected cultural background including remarks on the plant's ceremonial uses, plus a description by John Lawson, who noted the use of *Ilex vomitorium* for "medicinal effects, both vomiting and purging." By following Byrd through his reading, however, Berland actually repeats an error. Yaupon holly is not an emetic. (*Ilex vomitorium* happens to make a smooth tea, not unlike green tea.) Southeastern natives drank the tea for a caffeine buzz, then purged to make room for more caffeine. Proto-ethnographers like Lawson wrongly mistook Yaupon Holly for an emetic.

This is not an academic quibble. (Though one wonders, did Berland did run the manuscript by a working botanist?) In a list of *Dramatis Personae* that appends the volume, Ned Bearskin is missing. Was it that the Saponi hunter did not fit within the cast of Byrd's restoration comedy? Such omissions underscore the dangers of reading colonial texts in an Atlantic context. As the narrative sweeps local knowledge into the field of the metropole, as the local enters the realm, we lose sight of alterity. This physical presence of the periphery matters

because, in the case of Americas, we delve not only into the colonial world but also its aftermath.

Witness the final chapter of *Early American Cartographies*, Michael Drexler's dodgy if highly inventive "Hurricanes and Revolutions." Drexler's essay starts from a loaded coincidence: that plantation societies shared the dual threat of hurricanes and insurrection. A "stereographic analysis of semiotic continuities" (444) follows, with samples from the Caribbean to the coastal US South, then across temporal planes from the British enlightenment in America, through Frederick Douglass' fiction, to Herman Melville, who is read through the postmodern Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris. Drexler's essay barely coheres -- after multiple reads, I still struggle with the jumps -- and toward the end, he offers themes more than a conclusion -- uncertainty, partial control, and more broadly, a "discursive reservoir" for upending "arbitrary national and political boundaries" (466). As he spins counter-clockwise around his opening coincidence, never quite resolving the stated problem, Drexler leaves the driver of his inquiry both open and unspoken. What colonialists still feel compelled to chart, even amidst the redrawn boundaries, is an ethical space.

Stories continue to cut across the maps. In his study of the Dido Motif, Andrew Newman charts a recurring story on a global scale. To illustrate appearances of "Motif K185.1,"

Newman provides a two-page map (the only two-page spread in the entire volume), which is ironically based upon the Mercator projection. Icons shaped as bull- or oxheads mark the story's appearance from Ceylon to New Amsterdam to the Cape of Good Hope. While focusing on the Delaware version, however, Newman cites an email exchange with Jim Rementer, Director of the Lenape Language Preservation Project. Rementer recounts an instance in which the elder Nora Thompson Dean shared the story on a university campus. When a member of the audience, presumably an academic, asked what she thought about resemblances to Virgil, Dean replied curtly: "Nothing" (258). A gap remains between the native informant and a scholarly community. As colonialists continue to trace the stories that cut across the map, perhaps the vectors to examine are not only spatial but temporal. In the continuities of time, defined from within a redrawn map of colonial studies, there remains relevant work to be done.

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