

Geography, Sovereignty and Space:

The 2012-2013 Year at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies

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The works-in-progress presented at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies this year involved journeys across New England rivers, Midwestern farmlands, Florida borderlands, African colonies and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Presenters traced American efforts to organize civic life by restoring crumbling homes, redesigning neighborhoods, and patrolling public markets. They revealed American attempts to gain political control through storytelling, religious conversion, and gifts of food, and to reshape society by writing poetry, instructive fiction, and even medical literature. Overall, the most frequently recurring themes in works presented this year were geography, sovereignty and space.¹

Geography, Sovereignty and Space

Many projects presented this year at the McNeil Center explored the practices through which individuals and groups defined, maintained, and contested sovereignty over American spaces. **Susannah Shaw Romney** showed that male Dutch colonists in New Netherland used the physical bodies of women to define sovereignty over colonial territory: the presence of a childbearing *huysvrouw*, settled within the walls of a house, created Dutch civil space. Shifting our focus from land to water, **Andrew Lipman** drew attention to contests over sovereignty that played out on the waterways of New England and New York. The skilled use of watercraft, he argued, allowed Native Americans to keep sovereignty of the riverine “borderlands” out of the hands of European colonists.

¹ This essay discusses works presented in the informal “Wednesday Brownbag” sessions as well as the generally more polished work presented at the Friday seminars. However, all papers were presented as works-in-progress, and many were part of larger wholes. Thus the arguments summarized below should be understood as preliminary. Complete paper titles, sequence, and author information are available on the archived Friday seminars and Brown Bag series pages of the MCEAS website. Those interested in more information about the papers are encouraged to contact the authors directly.

Two other projects showed how officials of the new United States attempted to use the cultivation and exchange of food to control Native Americans and the land they inhabited. **Lori Daggar**, for one, described Eastern Quakers' efforts to convert Native Americans in the Ohio Valley into European-style agriculturalists, that is to say, "useful citizens." These Quakers furthered the aims of the United States by directing the transformation of "a vast west into a place resembling home"—a radical reconceptualization of the West as a domestic space. And **Rachel Herrmann** proposed the term "food diplomacy" to describe the ways in which United States officials and Native American groups vied for control over people and space through formal requests for food and presentations of food.

While these projects focused on contests within North America, others traced journeys beyond geographical and national borders that shaped the ideas and practices of American sovereignty. In two projects, Americans looked across the Pacific Ocean. **Michael Block** described the ways in which American seafarers of the early republic imagined the physical geography of the Pacific: mariners sought endlessly for elusive Pacific islands, while simultaneously fearing that they would run aground on islands without constant vigilance. And as **Dael Norwood** showed, early American politicians and political economists looked even further across the Pacific, to the continent of Asia. They hoped that the United States' burgeoning trade with Asia would increase American economic power, thus enabling the new republic to claim a place among the world's most important trading nations.

Traveling beyond national borders taught antebellum Americans to reframe their own political projects and goals. **Christopher Bonner** traced African American activists' engagement with the political and intellectual movements roiling Europe during the late 1840s. Overseas events at first led these activists to consider themselves as part of an Atlantic community, but they ultimately chose to focus on claiming their rightful place within the American body politic. Examining the patriotic enthusiasm of Anglo émigrés to Texas for their adopted government, **Sarah Manning Rodriguez** found not a disingenuous prelude to Manifest Destiny but a sincere attraction to Mexican political principles, which emphasized regional

sovereignty and local autonomy at a time when Southerners felt these principles to be threatened within the United States.

Federalism and the Abstract Geography of American Governance

The projects described above focused on sovereignty over physical space, but others explored more abstract geographies of American sovereignty, investigating the theoretical boundaries of American governance and tracing the contours of federalism. Two projects recontextualized the creation of the American Constitution. **Greg Ablavsky** argued that the power of Indian nations in the years after independence compelled the new states to form a fiscal-military union with enough power to overcome those nations. **Hannah Farber** suggested that the era of American constitution making did not end with the ratification of the federal constitution, but continued with the chartering of the United States' most powerful financial corporations, notably its marine insurance companies.

Some presenters traced movements that began among voluntary groups but became contentious issues in formal antebellum politics, ultimately raising questions about the nature of American government itself. **Adam Lewis** traced the efforts of the American Colonization Society to establish the colony of Liberia. As Liberia moved from one uncertain political status (a colony managed by a voluntary association) to another (a self-proclaimed sovereign state that the United States itself refused to recognize), it provoked debates about American sovereignty and the role of the United States in the world. **Ariel Ron** described the formation of a massive agricultural reform movement in the antebellum North. While initially mobilizing outside of a party framework, this movement gradually entered politics and ultimately restructured the American state itself.

Two other projects addressed troubling elements of American political culture that emerged just as new American governments were finding their footing. **Aaron Sullivan** showed that in British-occupied Pennsylvania, among a “disaffected” population ambivalent toward independence, Patriot leaders could only enforce American “liberty” through violence, terror and

despotism. And after independence, as **Oliver Cox** demonstrated, Americans continued to express admiration for the ancient Anglo-Saxon King Alfred, revealing a continued fascination with monarchy in an era usually identified with ardent republicanism. Cox's project, like Sullivan's, called the legacy of the Revolution into question. For Cox, the Revolution produced a republic that overthrew one British monarch but celebrated another; Sullivan showed us a proto-republic that avowed a commitment to liberty while violently repressing the political inclinations of its prospective citizens.

Economy and Society in Physical Spaces

Another set of presentations described attempts to shape American society through physical spaces and the built environment. **Whitney Martinko** argued that Americans of the early republic who fought to preserve old houses were actually progressives. Reformer-preservationists, believing that "the sacred historic spaces" of American memory could exert a salutary moral influence on an increasingly market-oriented public, aimed to guide, not thwart, the development of market society. **Irene Cheng** traced the history of another group of early republic reformers, who generated geometrically precise plans for the development of Western lands. Square townships punctuated by octagonal "republican villages," they believed, would positively influence social relations, countering the concentration of wealth and power in Jacksonian America. Both Cheng and Martinko's projects, on the whole, showed how Americans attempted to use physical spaces to shape their fellow citizens' relationships to the market.

As two other projects demonstrated, Americans attempted to control the market even more directly when they designed spaces to physically contain it. **Emma Hart** explained that colonial American auctions differed from their British analogues in that they were more frequent, more geographically widespread, and offered a wider range of goods. Divergent auction practices fostered divergent economic cultures, she suggested, which may have deepened the Revolutionary rift between colonies and metropole. Half a century later, with the Revolution well secured, public markets remained sites of public controversy. As **Robert Gamble** showed,

these markets were municipal institutions that aimed to contain trade within physical and temporal bounds. But the overseers of these markets struggled to retain control of urban commerce as the American population became more mobile, private retailers gained political influence, and wealthier city dwellers became preoccupied with urban disorder.

While some Americans attempted to use the built environment to control the market, others used physical spaces to further scientific and religious ambitions. Anthropologist **Sarah Chesney** excavated the greenhouse of the Philadelphia botanist William Hamilton, who designed his greenhouse to be the hub of a botanical community with interests and engagements stretching around the world. The physical characteristics of Hamilton's greenhouse and grounds reveal his struggle to balance a private enjoyment of his collections with an urge to win public acclamation. As **Jayne Ptolemy** showed, Americans' religious commitments also led them to reimagine and reconfigure physical spaces. Philadelphia Quakers' efforts to combat racial oppression were motivated by the belief that the races shared a single spiritual space. At the same time, however, the Quakers remained concerned about the maintenance of proper racial hierarchy in physical space. White Quakers hoped their urban black neighbors would make race relations simpler by removing themselves to the countryside, while simultaneously worrying that Native Americans in the West would experience moral degeneration without vigilant white supervision. And overseas, as **Ben Wright** argued, the millennial vision of widespread conversion of Africans to Christianity motivated both white and black proponents of African colonization. Colonizers, who believed that mass conversion would expunge the sin of the slave trade, even allowed their faith to guide the governance of their African colonies, which they imagined would become spaces devoted to Christ.

Genre, Writing, and Political Life

Several projects demonstrated the power of particular genres of writing to reshape American society and political life. By exploring unusual genres, or by drawing together genres usually considered separately, presenters demonstrated these genres' power to further social

causes within the American colonies and the republic. **Geoffrey Plank**, for one, discussed the writing of English reformer Thomas Tryon, who pioneered a variety of literary genres that would become far more defined and influential in the years after his death. Tryon's critiques of Pennsylvania at first elicited protest, but Pennsylvania Quakers themselves would later take up many of his concerns, including the treatment of slaves. Tryon's greatest contribution, Plank suggested, may have been his works in the genre of "instructive fiction"—a genre used by later reformers to build powerful political movements. **David Waldstreicher**, in a study of Phillis Wheatley, drew our attention to another frequently underappreciated genre: Revolutionary era, Classically inspired poetry. Emphasizing Wheatley's African roots and Classical learning rather than her Christianity, Waldstreicher suggested that Wheatley's understanding of Classical civilization informed her poems on slavery and lent them particular political potency.

Several presenters were able to offer new ideas about American self and society by transcending traditional distinctions of genre. **Mary Kelley** juxtaposed a New Englander's romantic correspondence with his fiancé with his political correspondence with John Adams, and thereby discovered connections between the Revolutionary rhetoric of classical republicanism and the language of sentiments that circulated in the era's *belles lettres*. Revolutionary Americans were both writers and readers; in absorbing and reproducing political and sentimental forms of writing, they developed a language of sensibility (and a socially oriented self) that bridged the gap between the two genres. **Sari Altschuler** also crossed the boundaries of genre by considering medical works alongside works of the imagination. Authors in both genres, as she showed, worried about the social consequences of discussing illness. The physician Elihu Hubbard Smith hoped that the circulation of "healthy" reason-driven information would curtail the illness brought on by imaginative sympathy, while his friend Charles Brockden Brown believed that forced empathy with the diseased would serve as a "narrative inoculation" protecting the health of the body politic.

Other projects built around cultural and literary sources turned more directly to the problem of political sovereignty, tracing the contests for American peoples and spaces across the

landscape of the imagination. Two presenters read the act of translation itself as an exertion of will toward sovereignty. In the religiously and linguistically splintered colony of mid-eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, **Patrick Erben** found that translation functioned as an expression of power and a tool for coercion. English-speaking Pennsylvanians promoted charity schools for German immigrants that used bilingual education and translation not as acknowledgments of pluralism but as “tools of coercion and imperial-re-education.” **Marie-Stéphanie Delamaire** argued that French reproductions of George Caleb Bingham’s paintings were themselves works of translation, through which Bingham and his French partners intervened in an argument about the place of the American West in the body politic. Moving into the realm of religion, **Maeve Kane** called attention to a Puritan-Anglican rift over the “sacred geography” of America and its Native inhabitants. Puritans cast Indians as sinful inhabitants of Canaan, whose resistance to conversion rendered them obstacles to Christ’s return, while more optimistic Anglican missionaries viewed Indian conversion as an achievable project that would speed the Second Coming. And as **Cameron Strang** demonstrated, science was also a means of contesting political power over space. In the unique geographical, political, and cultural space of the Florida borderlands, storytelling, power relations, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge were deeply interconnected processes; Native storytelling held a powerful influence over the way individuals and political bodies communicated knowledge.

Inclusivity and Absences

As this overview suggests, the most prominent themes in work presented at the McNeil Center during 2012-2013 were sovereignty, space, and geography, broadly conceived. Many presenters focused on the organization of space for political, religious, or commercial purposes, while many others described struggles for political control of contested spaces (coincidentally, a topic that will be the main focus of Edward Countryman and Juliana Barr’s upcoming edited volume, *Contested Spaces in Early America*, soon to be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.) By far, the largest number of McNeil Center presentations this year

investigated how these struggles proceeded during the era of the early republic—an age in which political control over North American space had been emphatically proclaimed, but was far from resolved. Almost half of the year’s presentations, in fact, focused on the early republic, with the remainder divided fairly evenly among the seventeenth century, the pre-Revolutionary eighteenth century, the American Revolution itself, and the antebellum era.

Across all of these time periods, the vision of “early America” produced by this body of work is a very rich one: it is a vision of a vast continent, geographically and politically fractured, whose physical realms were overlaid with a near-infinite number of religious, cultural, political, and even mythical spaces. This America was capacious enough to allow McNeil Center community members from a wide variety of disciplines and subfields to hold productive conversations, and to draw together bodies of scholarship that have long been considered separate subfields. For example, when I began reviewing this year’s presentations, I initially expected that projects on African American history and literature would form their own historiographical conversation. In fact, these projects largely worked toward the same themes as the others. A paper presented by **Christopher Cameron** made precisely this point: black Atlantic religious thought is generally assumed to be driven by abolitionist politics, but in reality, black religious thinkers, like whites, were driven by a wide range of spiritual concerns that deserve to be read, not just “read through” for political subtext. **Wendy Warren**, in a sense, offered an alternative perspective, presenting the possibility that slaves in seventeenth century New England resisted the regime of slavery that dominated their lives through a nearly infinite variety of criminal acts—suicide, bestiality, rape—even though the historical record would never reveal conclusive evidence of their motivations, and even though whites committed similar acts. Warren’s project, which meditated on the ultimately unknowable experiences and motives of individuals, elicited an animated discussion of the possibilities and limits of historical evidence with respect to this elusive question.

While this year’s presentations involved a wide range of topics and approaches, several well-established methodologies were nonetheless notably absent. For example, while many

projects explored geographical, cultural and social spaces, far fewer focused on individual objects or documents produced in those spaces. **Julie Fisher**'s presentation was one exception: she concentrated on a single letter sent by the Wampanoag "King Philip," attending closely to the letter's physical characteristics and to the process of its creation and transmission by the English-speaking scribe John Sassamon. Only a few authors, furthermore, presented social history or studies of everyday life within marginal, circumscribed, or "ordinary" spaces. Warren's project, described above, was one exception; another was **Carole Shammas**, whose empirical research demonstrated that primary schooling in eighteenth-century America was not driven by "localism" or "proto-democratic impulses," and that it remained strongly discriminatory with respect to race and gender. Her evidence suggested that recent historians may have overestimated how many Americans could have participated in the "public sphere" and the "culture of sensibility" that some claim to have emerged over the course of the century. **Cassandra Pybus** sifted through fragmentary evidence to reconstitute the families of black Loyalists fleeing Revolutionary Virginia and to trace their journeys through exile. And **Matthew Williams** used court cases to show that colonial Anglo-American authorities during the latter half of the eighteenth century worked more strenuously to punish sexual assaults, conceiving of such prosecutions as an important part of the broader project of combating social disorder in the years before the American Revolution. As projects such as these affirm, sifting through large numbers of relatively obscure historical occurrences is still a crucially important way to answer major historical questions, particularly questions about marginalized peoples. Despite several generations of scholarship, many such questions remain to be answered.

Presenters' interest in big spaces did not seem to be linked to direct interest in big theories. Few overtly identified with, or directly disputed, formal geographic frameworks such as oceanic history, Atlantic history, or global history. In fact, few projects engaged directly with existing theories of gender, culture, or power, or with theoretical concerns about the study of history or literature more broadly. And in narrating journeys across physical space, presenters rarely discussed their own journeys: few offered direct critiques of their archival sources, and

while many of the projects were political in nature, presenters almost never referenced contemporary politics or explored how politics might have shaped their analyses.

Finally, and rather surprisingly, given the overwhelming interest in space, few projects used the tools of the digital humanities to explore and map space. Though many universities around the world are currently developing digital humanities resources, little of the scholarship drawing on these resources seems to have reached the presentation stage. Cassandra Pybus, again an exception, presented visualizations that drew on her database of black loyalist refugees named in the 1783 Book of Negroes. But only one project, **Braxton Boren's**, leaned heavily on digital technology: Boren used acoustic archeology to investigate whether the preacher George Whitefield's voice could actually have reached crowds of 30,000 without amplification. While this was certainly a spatial project of sorts, it was not based in a humanities department—Boren hailed from New York University's Music and Audio Research Laboratory.

In sum, the projects presented at the McNeil Center this year roamed across a wide variety of American spaces, making major forays across political and continental boundaries. In general, the projects complemented one another well. The frequent recurrence of the year's major themes made it easy to hold productive conversations across traditional disciplinary boundaries—though English, American Studies, and history predominated—while among historians, the divisions among the hoary categories of political, economic, social, and cultural history seem more surmountable than ever. In a moment such as this, there seem to be tremendous possibilities for more direct collaborations among scholars, particularly as the field of digital humanities develops.

On the other hand, however, the presentations did not seem to reflect a field privileging inner journeys, or individual people or objects. Self-examination, micro-histories, deep questioning of the historical archive, and direct engagement with academic theory and contemporary politics were scarce. For the purposes of the McNeil Center, the relative absence of these approaches within the newest scholarship in the field is neither good nor bad in itself—the disciplines can only move in so many directions at once—but it is worth acknowledgment

and perhaps further reflection. Given that so many are currently interested in how Americans of the past created and defined the spaces they inhabited, perhaps some of us may wish to consider creating new spaces of our own, where these latter conversations might be renewed or reconsidered.