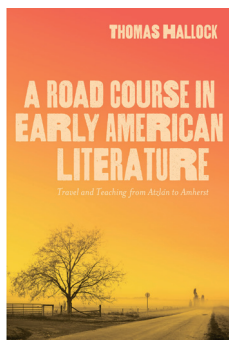




A ROAD COURSE IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE: TRAVEL AND TEACHING FROM ATZLÁN TO AMHERST

by Thomas Hallock
(A Book Review)



What if every book-length work of literary criticism were accompanied by a map? Not simply a map here or there detailing specific points and illustrating certain locations of relevance, but a map indicating the geographical scope of the book's contents? Such a map would immediately communicate a great deal of relevant context as the reader approaches the discussion. Few would deny the importance

of historical contextualization in literary study, but the importance of geographical contextualization is only sometimes recognized, despite the recent 'spatial turn' across the humanities.

Thomas Hallock provides one such map as the frontispiece of *A Road Course in Early American Literature: Travel and Teaching from Atzlán to Amherst*, recently published by the University of Alabama Press. The book is written as a sequence of journeys, blending anecdotal experiences with intellectual concerns and moments of pedagogical inspiration and Hallock writes that the inspiration for his project comes from "a still-unpopular belief that narrative nonfiction [can] breathe life into scholarly discourse" (2021: 8). As part of an academic memoir, however, the map Hallock provides is as concerned with his personal travels as it is with the study of early American literature. Hallock writes that

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he has “striven for coverage across geographic space (and yes, periods). But as early American literature follows no single thread,” so, too, do the chapters of his book “adhere to only the loosest of chronologies” (2021: 19). For this reason, Hallock tells his readers “*Road Course* can be read in any number of ways. One may follow the chapters in order or skip around. Those who go straight through, I hope, will find the interlocking themes” (2021: 19). As the book is episodic in structure, roads and highways do not connect these essays—and only two are represented on his map by arrows designating travel between two points within the chapters themselves.

Despite its visual simplicity, then, Hallock’s map contains a complex set of layers. Each chapter simultaneously corresponds to a place visited, his personal experiences there, as well as some consideration of an author or a literary work relevant to that place (or sometimes simply read or remembered in that setting). In all senses, however, the chapters in Hallock’s book are essays—often more personal than they are strictly academic or pedagogical—they seek to understand and to make meaningful the connections between life and literature. They are endeavors to appreciate how his life has been shaped by his work as a professor and a scholar while simultaneously understanding how these experiences have been shaped by travel.

Hallock has accomplished much in his twenty-five years in the academy, with a number of scholarships and positions of distinction to his name. It is from this perspective that he contemplates his experiences and considers his growth and “slow evolution from graduate student to teacher” that now allows him to better “impart understanding of the text, putting the tools of close reading to work, though [his] pedagogy focuses increasingly on *how* we read rather than *what*” (2021: 19). These reflections range from a course on African American literature he gave as a Fulbright Specialist in Xi’an, China, reading Phillis Wheatley on a flight crossing the Arctic Circle (Chapter 5), to his time spent traveling with an NEH seminar in Mexico and the Southwest (Chapter 8). He looks back on teaching Susanna Rowson’s *Sarah* for ‘Just Teach One’ (or ‘JTO’), a classroom experiment in which “early Americanists assign a noncanonical or forgotten book, then blog about their classroom experiences” (Chapter 3, 2021: 57). Along

the way, these memories are intermingled with personal anecdote and are always situated in place. When he recalls teaching Rowson's book, for example, the reader is simultaneously following Hallock's (mis)adventures in Eastern Pennsylvania while retracing the steps of the Walking Purchase of 1737. When he writes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Anne Hutchinson, the reader travels with Hallock to his hometown in Westchester County, New York, along the Hutchinson River Parkway and to Split Rock, the site, according to legend, of Hutchinson's massacre in 1643 (Chapter 10).

At the same time, Hallock does not neglect the more mundane aspects of life of a professor and the reader nods in agreement at Hallock's frustration with academic bureaucracy, writing of how going to class—and returning to the literature itself—is what offers “a respite from the ugly abbreviations—from the SCHs and KPIs, ALCs and SLOs” (2021: 124). So too does the reader find Hallock cleaning his office on campus, sorting through old folders and filing cabinets and rediscovering notable papers and projects from past semesters (Chapter 11). One of the journeys depicted in the book is not his own, but that of a group of students who leave their sunny Florida campus during spring break to visit Nathaniel Hawthorne's snow-covered grave at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts (Chapter 9). They have contributed to Hallock's own understanding of the “redemptive power of a road trip” (2021: 127), not only inspiring him by going above-and-beyond to complete a course project, but also by internalizing Hawthorne's “Custom-House” essay to better understand their own lives and place in the world. They have learned from the example of their professor, venturing out on their own experiential study of literature-in-place.

The importance of balancing the more adventurous parts of his narrative with the routine aspects of a professorship is, at times, highly effective. Teaching, scholarship, life—each one plays an equally important role in Hallock's construction of these chapters, as when we find him gazing out the window from his writing desk at home, contemplating the crows in his yard (Chapter 7). Titled “A Raven and Three Crows,” that chapter exemplifies Hallock's process in this book. There, he considers John James Audubon, Herman Melville and William Bartram and—as one might suspect—Edgar Allan Poe. The chapter strays far from the birds of its title, however, as Hal-

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lock's musings combat the tired idea that "[t]he American author should be a crank, abandoned by or even hostile to family" (2021: 98). Hallock avoids teaching Poe and thereby the essays of "breathy nonanalysis of the 'tortured genius'" (2021: 96) that students inevitably submit after reading him. What bothers Hallock most is that the insistence upon "[t]he myth of the solitary genius, visionary from the wilderness," because it "distances us from the collaboration found in almost any work of art" (2021: 99). A close reading of the available materials would suggest that no writer or artist—Audubon, Bartram, Melville, Poe, or anyone else—ever truly fits the mold of 'solitary genius' and the obvious implication is that the idea of the *professor* as 'solitary genius' also needs debunking, particularly within the humanities. The entirety of Hallock's book attests to that, as he is inspired not only by his students, but also by his family. Both his son and his wife are present as the book unfolds. Returning to the chapter's title, one realizes that one crow is missing, as Hallock writes that Melville "never wrote about ravens or crows" (2021: 98). Hallock's meditation concerns the "Mast-Head" chapter of *Moby-Dick* and does not really involve crows at all, only the "crow's nest" of a ship. It would seem that the third crow of the essay's title, then, appears at the very end, when his son (affectionately referred to as "the kid" throughout the book), draws a crow on Hallock's research folder with a Sharpie after seeing a reproduction of Audubon's "American Crow." It is poignant, especially within the larger context of the sometimes-difficult relationship he has with his son. So too does it present a clear affirmation of his project in *Road Course*—that his teaching and his research are never far-removed from his family life. Collaboration and insight come in many forms, in unpredictable ways and in unexpected places.

It should be clear, then, that *Road Course* is not to be mistaken for a road trip. It is, instead, a way of joining literature with travel to broaden one's perspective. In the context of early American literature, this often means visiting places that may or may not still exist. As such, one cannot follow the pages of Hallock's book as a guide to the landscape or the literature—but one can find inspiration in these pages to approach literary study and pedagogy from one's own experiences with literature-in-place. The book

is actively written as a journey, as “[s]tories presumably press us into a deeper, more responsible engagement with place” (2021: xxvi). What interests Hallock is how the geography of North America is involved in both the creation of literary narratives as much as it is involved in shaping how those narratives are understood today, contributing to the myth of America, several centuries removed.

Given that Hallock’s endeavor is based in that “still-unpopular belief” regarding the blending of narrative nonfiction and academic study, study, a future edition of the book might quiet those objections by appending some version of the bibliographic essay found on his website. Titled “Footnote Trails,” it is where one finds “the scholarly backstory” deliberately removed from the essays that comprise the book (“Footnote Trails” 4). Consciously working in “the field of the essay, as opposed to the scholarly article,” writes Hallock, “started as something as a whim but increasingly appeared to me as a conscious choice” (“Footnote Trails” 11). He had originally thought of himself as writing in the tradition of D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) or William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* (1925), but abandons that model in favor of more contemporary guides (“Footnote Trails” 11).

Yet, one wishes that Hallock had channeled more of the energy and breadth found in Williams’s book. Although he refers to the poet several times, the pages of *Road Course* make no mention of *In the American Grain*, which provides an evenly-balanced consideration of the English, the Spanish and the French presences in early America. At one point in his introduction Hallock asks, “How many US citizens can point to Manitoba or Chihuahua on a map?” (17). It is a fair question, but flipping back to Hallock’s own frontispiece map, one sees only a partial outline of Mexico, an oversimplified Caribbean and only the faintest indication of Canada by gesturing toward the Maritimes and the Gaspésie. Within the context of the book itself, Mexico and the Southwest are given a chapter, but otherwise the book is primarily confined to the Eastern Seaboard with one excursion to the Pacific Northwest and a passing mention of the Dakotas. Canada is almost entirely absent and Mexico does not appear as a place so much as it does an object of textual study through Mesoamerican codices. It is one instance where Hallock’s dedication to scholarly pursuits

would seem to impair his imaginative vision. Although Mexico City and the historic Tenochtitlán may dominate the political realities of Mexico both past and present, the reader never knows if Hallock traveled further in that county. The complexities of Mexico are wide and far-reaching and one wishes that the chapter's title, "Oro de Oaxaca," were in reference to the state in Southern Mexico and not to the brand of mezcal. In the end, although this chapter may contribute to broadening the academic scope and pedagogical approaches to early American literary study, it also illustrates just how limited the geographical scope of Hallock's book is.

In this sense, then, the frontispiece map does present a fair representation of the book—but it also points to missed opportunities of which Hallock is certainly aware. "In a survey of our national literature," he writes, "I suggest geography—rather than time—as an organizing frame" (2021: 10). If this is the case, his book can only provide the very loosest of frames. The study of early American literary and cultural history offers a glimpse into a period of time when Benedict Anderson's "logo-map" (2021: 16) of the US was not only an unstable idea, but also an impossible one. The subject matter itself indicates the ways in which the field might reconsider the geographical and historical context of its subject matter, repositioning it within a wider array of the available materials, but Hallock's book is still essentially bound by the "logo-map," however much the conception of the book strives to challenge it.

In fairness to Hallock, he never indicates whether he has traveled to, studied in, or written about the Mississippi River Valley, the Great Lakes, Upper and Lower Canada, the Caribbean, or the Spanish Main beyond Florida and his brief trip to Mexico City. If he has written about any of these or other places, essays in this vein and in those locations would enrich his *Road Course* immensely, primarily by considering the French colonial presence in early America, which was vast and is widely neglected in the teaching of early American literature. Hallock envisions teaching the American literature survey "as a base, from which we reflect back and forth upon a past that still has not passed" (2021: 19). At the same time, however, one senses that as much as he desires to expand the traditional scope of the course, he remains as geographically

constricted by it as any of the available anthologies that frustrate him and so many other professors who teach in the same field.

Nevertheless, Hallock cannot be expected to solve these entrenched limitations on his own and what his book offers is valuable: an honest and sincere reflection of the challenges of teaching and learning a subject matter as unwieldy geographically as it is historically. It was John Dewey who wrote, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), that geography and history are “two phases of the same living whole, since the life of men in association goes on in nature, not as an accidental setting, but as the material and medium of development” (1997: 218). Both geography and history “[bring] about the enlargement of the significance of a direct personal experience” (218). How does one come to a more unified understanding of the Americas as a continent of interconnected places and as a changing historical reality over time? Neither geography nor history—nor literature, for that matter—can be ends in themselves, but must be part of a larger educational framework. How can the connections among these areas of study be better understood? How can one best use personal experience to inform one’s approach? Where does one begin? Hallock’s *Road Course* offers one possible place to start.

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