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A Literate South: Reading Before Emancipation. By Beth Barton Schweiger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. pp. 288. Cloth \$35.00)

In 1826, historian Jared Sparks was making his way through the state of Virginia, gathering documents related to his research on George Washington when he paid a visit to a Mr. Gray of Fredericksburg, an agent for the *North American Review*, which Sparks had purchased in 1824. Sparks noted Gray's relative success—forty-six subscribers—in circulating the *Review* in the vicinity. Yet, he wrote, “[Gray] thinks there will be no such thing as book-making in Virginia for a century to come. People here prefer talking to reading.”¹ In her rigorously researched and elegantly written study of literacy in the antebellum South, Beth Barton Schweiger maintains that “talking” and “reading” are not so separate. Indeed, in an essential reminder to historians of literacy and print culture, Schweiger contends at the outset that print “[co-existed] with oral tradition in a rich give-and-take in which printed texts reflected speech and speech incorporated texts,” especially in the American South (xi). *A Literate South: Reading Before Emancipation* historicizes “literate” (a term far from settled in the antebellum period) and the act of “reading” by decoupling them from a strict engagement with alphabetic print literacy and by questioning their centrality to the fostering of liberal ideals.

Capturing the unexceptional and somewhat haphazard nature of everyday reading and writing in the rural South is one of the book's major contributions. Schweiger elegantly moves between the personal habits and affairs of two families living in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Cooleys and the Speers, and a much larger narrative about the “poetics of everyday life” in the South (xi). Grounded in the private diaries of farmer's daughters Amanda and Betsy Cooley of Virginia, and Methodist tanner's daughters Jennie and Ann Speer of North Carolina, Schweiger

¹ Herbert Baxter Adams, ed., *The Life and Writings of Jared Sparks*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893): 417.

builds the book around their literacy histories—what they read and when, what genres they liked and why, what levels of education they achieved. The Cooley diaries illuminate the relationship between these habits of reading and writing and all of the other demands of life on the farm and in the home: milking, spinning, weaving, gossiping, worshipping. The Speer diaries, on the other hand, record the “spiritual ambitions and aspirations” of two young women yearning to improve their learning and become educators themselves (32), dreams sadly cut short by tuberculosis, recounted affectingly by both women. Even if the center-periphery dynamic of antebellum print production (well-documented by book historians) remains true, the rural South was a rich market for print, sustained through book agents, the mail, missionaries, schools, and printing offices. Both sets of diaries reveal how deeply connected these women were to the region, the nation, and the world by reading from the same spellers, browsing the same copies of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, consulting the same almanacs, and singing the same hymns as others had across time and space.

In part one, Schweiger focuses on nineteenth-century pedagogy, exploring how autodidacts like the Cooleys engaged with steady sellers like Webster’s blue-back or Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar* (1795). The Cooleys never reached the educational level of the Speer women, who studied rhetoric and composition in formal academic settings and whose personal writings are inflected with the Romantic-era aesthetics they had studied. Crucially, through the Cooley’s diaries, we are also introduced to Jincy, an enslaved woman who was sometimes recorded spelling or reading. Though information on Jincy is thin, Schweiger uses her fleeting presence to interrogate the boundaries of literacy and liberation in the 1840s when slaveholders “saw no contradiction between their power to whip Jincy and her ability to read” (51). If anything, literacy was a “means of social control,” and Jincy’s time with the blue-back speller, a book sometimes crafted by enslaved people’s hands, reaffirmed her subordination (51).

Part two more explicitly tackles the reciprocal relationship between orality and print by looking at genres like hymnbooks, local histories, and denominational periodicals. For example, Schweiger traces the movement of spiritual songs from British hymnist Isaac Watts to the ears and voices of enslaved people via the printed songbooks of Richard Allen in Philadelphia; that is, print encouraged an oral/aural tradition that encouraged a print tradition. Next, Schweiger covers “stories” of all kinds, from local legends around the fireside to serialized novels, almanacs, and biographies. At the same time as the Cooleys and Speers consumed stories of worlds far away, stories of Appalachia and its heroes (like Daniel Boone) landed in “the parlors of New York and London,” as curiosities of folk life (173). Finally, Schweiger turns to the wealth of denominationally-specific religious materials that stirred up revival and descension in the South. In one of the most moving sections of part two, Schweiger returns to Jennie Speer’s diary to consider the role that the tutelage of theologian Charles Deems, a “holiness Methodist,” had on her life as a female educator. Speer’s yearning to be holy, to know more, and to do good as a teacher at Greensboro Female College was shaped by all of the literacy practices that this book captures: family conversation, preaching, reading aloud, private journaling, pleasure reading. With so much rich ground to cover, here, part two seemed more hastily conceived. Put differently, this section invites scholars to unfurl the myriad threads Schweiger lays out about the dense print landscape—and its political, social, and religious inflections—of the rural South.

In the book’s conclusion, Schweiger reposes its central question and her major critical intervention: “What do we gain by remembering that print was ubiquitous in rural neighborhoods before emancipation?” (199). Her question yields a number of promising new directions for scholars of the American South, book history, African American history, and women’s history. Surely there are more “unexceptional” examples of every day reading, spelling, talking, writing,

and singing to be found. Together, they might go some way in changing the narrative of a depressed southern print culture, but more than that, challenge scholars to find the traces of life with print outside of the traditional archives, scholarly practices, or printed things alone that have made the Cooleys, Speers, and Jincys of the rural South invisible for too long.

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