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Marking the Land in North America

A Straight Line through the Wilderness: Geometry and Geography in William Byrd's *Histories of the Dividing line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728 sqq)

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A Straight Line through the Wilderness: Geometry and Geography in William Byrd's *Histories of the Dividing line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina (1728 sqq)*

Julien Nègre

Introduction

- 1 In 1728, William Byrd II, the master of the luxurious Westover plantation in Virginia, took part in an expedition that had an unusual purpose: appointed by the colonies of Virginia and North Carolina, its members were commissioned to draw a long straight line that would mark the border separating the two colonies. This was the end of a dispute that had been going on for years: two contradictory royal charters dating back to the 1660s located the northern limit of North Carolina in two different places and, because of that, the boundary line had never been surveyed.¹ A consensus as to the location of the border was reached only in the 1720s; it was decided that the commissioners would survey the line from a point on the Atlantic coast, on the northern shore of “Currituck Inlet,” acknowledged by both colonies as the eastern limit of the border. As was the case with most of the original colonies, the charter that defined the territory of North Carolina was a “sea-to-sea charter”—it only defined the northern and southern limits of the colony, which then extended from the Atlantic Ocean as far as the “South Sea,” that is to say the Pacific Ocean. How distant that ocean might be was completely unknown at the time; for that reason, the commissioners’ task was to survey the line as far westward as they could go.
- 2 It was a strenuous mission, not to say a dangerous one. The border region between Virginia and North Carolina was not densely populated. Only a few farms were

scattered through this swampy area, and there was none of the great, wealthy plantations that bordered the James River, further to the north. First, the line had to be drawn through the coastal region surrounding the infamous “Great Dismal Swamp,” made up of impenetrable marshes infested with mosquitoes, into which no human being had ever ventured; then, 50 miles or so from the shore, the line would leave the area of white settlement to penetrate the dense, dark forest, inhabited by unpredictable Indians and wild creatures.² To perform this task, the party included surveyors, whose duty was to determine the course of the line due west, but also chain-carriers (carrying the “surveyor’s chains” used to measure the length of the line), as well as “axe-men,” whose task was to clear the way for the surveyors and fell the trees standing in the axis of the line.³ Marking the land, on such a scale and in such a setting, was a Herculean task.

- 3 This is nowhere more evident than in Byrd’s *Histories of the Dividing line*, a “double” text with a complex history that narrates the survey of that boundary line. William Byrd II was a wealthy man of 54 when he took part in the expedition as a commissioner appointed by the colony of Virginia. His only task was to make sure the survey was done properly and accurately, which left him plenty of time to take notes and observe the country. Writing was a daily habit for Byrd, who was an aristocrat and a learned man: he had been educated in England and during his lifetime, his library is thought to have been the largest privately-owned library in the American colonies.⁴ The account of the surveying expedition that Byrd wrote is now known as the *Histories* (in the plural) because it consists of two texts that tell two different stories, or rather that offer two different perspectives on the same story.
- 4 The first text, usually referred to as the *History*, was acquired as an anonymous manuscript by the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia at the end of the eighteenth century. At the time, no one knew it had been written by William Byrd. This text contains a fairly neutral account of the proceedings of the surveyors and includes numerous remarks on the fauna and flora encountered by the expedition, as well as personal remarks by the author concerning possible land improvements. Although, in this account, Byrd (a proud Virginian) sounds sometimes contemptuous of his North Carolinian counterparts, overall his text tends to erase all ungraceful details concerning the expedition: the bickering, the jealousy, the drunkenness and licentiousness.
- 5 All these details appear in the *other* text, known as *The Secret History*. This text was unearthed from the Byrd family’s archive by Thomas Jefferson himself in 1817.⁵ He transmitted it to the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia, which was then able to identify the author of the *History*. The *Secret History* appears as an honest account (to say the least) of what the members of the expedition really experienced when drawing the line. In this lively text, Byrd uses evocative (and humorous) pseudonyms to describe the members of the party: while he refers to himself as “Steady”, other members are referred to as “Puzzlecause,” “Meanwell” or “Shoebrush”,—depending on how close they were to the author. Byrd offers here a full account of everyone’s behavior—or, rather, *lapses* in behavior: some of the commissioners drink too much, others are uselessly aggravating, and most of them, once let loose in the wilderness, prove unable to behave like gentlemen with the ladies (be they black, Indian, or white) they encounter.

- 6 Byrd's "secrecy" is, of course, highly ambivalent. The text seems to have been labeled "secret" by the author himself, and the use of pseudonyms shows that Byrd wanted to make identification difficult. Yet the very content of his text, lively and entertaining as it is, suggests that Byrd might have intended it for a wider audience. We can assume that the *History* was meant to be a drier, factual and "public" account of the expedition, signed in Byrd's name, while the *Secret History* was the more spirited version, written under a pseudonym to entertain Byrd's friends and relations.⁶ At any rate, the American Philosophical Association chose to keep the text *completely* secret, despite Jefferson's complaints. While the *History* was published several times and in different forms throughout the nineteenthth century, the *Secret History*, because of its questionable content, remained in the Association's archives and was not published until 1929, more than two hundred years after Byrd's expedition. In that first edition, prepared by William K. Boyd, the two texts were printed facing each other, each journal entry directly opposite its counterpart in the other text, which allowed for easy comparison and encouraged to read the two texts together. This is precisely my aim here: I would like to study Byrd's double text as one single text made up of two complementary narrative threads. In this article, I will refer to both texts collectively and indiscriminately, as they are printed in Boyd's edition. As noted, however, the texts will be referred to, when necessary, as the *History* and the *Secret History*, respectively. To facilitate further reference, I should add that quotes located on even-numbered pages always refer to the *History*, while those located on odd-numbered pages refer to the *Secret History*.
- 7 While the two texts offer a slightly different point of view, they both reveal a man who is deeply aware of the novelty of the world around him and who pays great attention to the things he sees. Byrd finds himself journeying westward through unknown territory, with little else to do than to make sure the surveyors perform their task properly. Forced as he is to follow a straight course through the wilderness, Byrd's perception of the world he discovers is progressively shaped by the line his men are drawing. As he describes the progress of the expedition westward, the figure of the line emerges as a powerful organizing principle in his text and the central motif that informs his representation of the world in general and of his own journey westward in particular. Geometry is here distinctly at odds with geography: in a border region characterized by instability and blurriness, the survey of the line allows for precise positioning and brings order and clear geometrical certainty. At the same time, this rigid structure superimposed on the land is only the first step toward its appropriation and control by colonial settlers: as Byrd's colonial frame of mind clearly shows, the land is *enclosed* by the line, but, thereby, it is also *opened up* for settlement, paving the way for the pioneers who will soon follow. Yet, for Byrd, the experience of drawing the line through the wilderness eventually goes beyond this materialistic dimension and takes on a more intimate meaning; the colonial settler gradually leaves the mental framework of his plantation and, as he keeps journeying along the line, finds himself irresistibly attracted westward. The map of his universe is perceptibly altered.

Order and stability

- 8 From the very start, the expedition takes the form of a confrontation with an unknown and unpredictable territory. The commissioners and their surveyors soon discover that

the locals will not be able to help them in any way. On 13 March, Byrd notes: “We saw plainly there was no Intelligence of this Terra Incognita to be got, but from our own Experience” (Byrd 60). The surveyors are confronted with an area where even the oldest inhabitants have only a vague idea of what lies around them. The region has been settled for dozens of years, but it remains a *terra incognita*—a blank space on the map and in the mind of local settlers. The first effect of the survey is thus to bring order and stability into a border region characterized by disorder and uncertainty. The very origin of the boundary dispute is a certain degree of slipperiness in the local toponymy: the royal charter signed in 1665 said the boundary would extend from the coast to a place named “Weyanoke Creek,” but the topography seems to have been so blurred in the mind of local settlers that when the two colonies first tried to reach an agreement, in the early 1700s, barely forty years later, no one could say where or what Weyanoke Creek was. Was it *Wicocon Creek*, as the Virginians claimed, or was it a place on the Nottoway River, farther to the north, as argued by the Carolinians? No one knew for sure. Byrd’s text reveals an area in space where names disappear, move and evolve, and eventually slip out of use. The first task of the surveyors is to resolve this uncertainty by anchoring the toponymy and making sure the local map is devoid of any ambiguity.

- 9 Yet, even determining the starting point of the line proves to be a conundrum: the whole area near the coast is made up of spits of sand that keep moving every day. As they reach the northern shore of Currituck Inlet, where they are supposed to start drawing the line, the surveyors learn that the inlet has moved about 200 yards southward in the last 40 years; where or what is Currituck Inlet then? Are they supposed to find the place where the inlet was when the charters were signed? In Deleuzian terms, they are on a “smooth” space (*espace lisse*) where no point has definite coordinates (Deleuze and Guattari 596). Just as if they were lost at sea, there is no reliable landmark, and positions in space are hard to determine. Eventually, the commissioners are forced to choose an arbitrary starting point, in an environment that is practically evolving under foot (Byrd 42-47). They drive a cedar-post in the sand to mark the starting point of the line (Byrd 46-47): it becomes the first geometrical point of the diagram they are beginning to draw in the area. The introduction of geometry has immediate effects: as this graph starts unfolding westward, local topographical mysteries are unexpectedly solved. The place known to locals as *Knott’s Island*, for example, is discovered one day to be a peninsula, not an island (Byrd 50).⁷ It is as if America was being discovered all over again.
- 10 The general instability of the region has legal and territorial implications: for example, settlers do not know to which colony they belong and to whom they are supposed to pay taxes (Byrd 58, 88). The border region as a whole has become an in-between space where no law really applies. In his introduction to the 1929 edition of Byrd’s texts, Boyd quotes a letter written in 1714 by Governor Spotswood of Virginia, who describes the situation and explains that “loose and disorderly people daily flock here.”⁸ The region had become a safe haven for all kinds of outcasts and outlaws who found refuge here. The words used by Governor Spotswood are significant: just like these people, the whole area is, precisely, “loose” instead of being fixed and anchored; it is “disorderly” instead of being structured. The moral delinquency of this dark corner of the world is a reflection of its cartographic blurriness. The border region through which the line is run is an area in space that belongs to no one and everyone. It is out of bounds, off

limits. The purpose of the geometrical line is precisely to bring it back *in*, back into each colony.⁹ Significantly, Byrd narrates how, every night, the members of the expedition build a wooden enclosure around their camp: “We made a Circular Hedge of the Branches of this Tree, Wrought so close together as to fence us against the Cold Winds.” (Byrd 44). Such an enclosure works as an image in reduction of the enclosure they are drawing in the region as a whole. The surveyors fence themselves in, trying to keep chaos at bay.

- 11 Even though, on the map, the border merely appears as a straight line, because of its geometrical nature, it represents the first outline of what will eventually become a grid, a Cartesian diagram that will superimpose order and rational spatial representation on what is otherwise pure chaos and an undecipherable mass of life forms and topographical uncertainties. Its axis, most notably, will become the basis of later surveys of fields and estates that do not exist yet. In his book *L’Empire des cartes*, Jacob comments on the semiotics of maps and notes that a straight line on a map has a very precise function: it indicates that the abstract, geometrical grid used by the mapmaker can potentially spread over the entire continent and subdue the uncontrollable wilderness (Jacob 163). Marking the land makes it known and located: it is put on the map, literally and figuratively. Mental representations become fixed and definite. “Smooth” space gradually turns into “striated” space (*espace strié*): there is shift from a space defined by circulation and trajectories to a space that is at the same time *checkered* by the rectangular grid and *checked* (carefully controlled and fastened) by the unambiguous location of the line. In a striated space, points can have coordinates and, hence, an unchangeable position in space. This has very material consequences: land-ownership and taxability become possible.

From order to control

- 12 Anchoring the topography is the first step toward taking control of the land. Byrd himself, a rich owner and a figure of authority in the hierarchy of his colony, is a key agent in bringing the land and the people under control.¹⁰ The pseudonym he uses is significant: when he depicts himself as a “steady” man among the members of the expedition, he signals that he is a firm, unmovable landmark in the social landscape; order and discipline are his responsibility. Even “fluxes,” i.e. diarrhea, an acute and painful case of disorderly bodily activity (in this case, of loose bowels), are brought “within bounds” (Byrd 68) by Byrd himself through a specific treatment based on local plants. The anchoring of topography and toponymy paves the way for settlement, that is to say for a process of “marking” on the land on a much larger scale: fields and plantations will soon spread across what is now an impenetrable forest. The *History* is full of digressions in which Byrd freely offers his own estimation of possible land improvements: the marshes “might, by the Labour of a few Trenches, be drain’d into firm Meadow, capable of grazing as many cattle as Job, in his best Estate, was master of” (Byrd 50); somewhere else on the river, “the Blowing up of a few Rocks wou’d open a Passage at least for canoes, which certainly wou’d be an unspeakable Convenience to the Inhabitants of all that beautiful Part of the Country” (Byrd 212). Byrd dutifully takes notes and paves the way for the settlers who will soon follow in his tracks.
- 13 The very words used by Byrd reveal to what extent his world-view is shaped by his economic position and his colonial frame of mind. One day, for example, Byrd discovers

a beautiful valley in the forest. The place is located deep in the woods. No road leads there and what he sees is just woodland. Yet, the conclusion of his description is significant:

This had a most agreeable Effect upon the Eye, and wanted nothing but Cattle grazing in the Meadow, and Sheep and Goats feeding on the Hill, to make it a Compleat Rural LANDSCAPE. (Byrd 296—*sic*).

- 14 Under his eyes, the forest turns into fields, cattle appears as if by magic and, instead of an untamed wilderness, the scene becomes a familiar, pastoral “*landscape*.” This is a key-word: a landscape implies an onlooker who looks at natural scenery through a precise frame—either a frame of mind or, typically, the wooden frame of a painting. Through this frame, Byrd is able to mentally subtract the wild elements in the scenery he is looking at, and to focus only on the underlying topographical structure and its “pastoral” potential. Byrd’s pastoral ideal “marks” the land; it transforms it into a civilized and familiar space. In his review-essay on Marambaud’s biography of Byrd, Lewis P. Simpson has underlined the importance and complexity of Southern pastoralism in Byrd’s world-view. The plantation, he argues, is perceived as an enclosed microcosm over which the planter is the only ruler (Simpson 191-193). Here, precisely, Byrd’s envisioned land improvements are shaped by his social function: as master of a wealthy plantation, he projects his own microcosm onto the landscape he encounters.
- 15 Partly because of the legal uncertainty surrounding the boundary line, the region as it is depicted by Byrd is only inhabited by poor farmers of European descent who do not make great efforts to take advantage of the land on which they live. In his descriptions of these people, Byrd is constantly rambling about their unacceptable idleness (a vice he essentially locates in North Carolina), which maintains them in a state of destitution.
- All his wants proceeded from Indolence, and not from Misfortune. He had good Land, as well as good Health and good Limbs to work it (...). I am sorry to say it, but Idleness is the general character of the men in the Southern Parts of this Colony as well as in North Carolina. (Byrd 304)¹¹
- 16 Here again, the line works its magic: Byrd considers that, by making surveys possible, it will allow for future settlement and, thus, an industrious appropriation of the land. As it divides the two colonies, the line circumscribes idleness, puts it within bounds and, ultimately, under control. It is an ongoing process: Byrd is well aware of the rapidity of the movement of westward expansion and, for him, the line should be carried at least to the Allegheny Mountains:
- surely the West line shou’d be carry’d as near to them as may be, that both the Land of the King [*Virginia*], & of the Lords [the Lords Proprietors of Carolina] may be taken up the faster, & that his Majesty’s Subjects may as soon as possible extend themselves to that Natural Barrier. This they will do in a very few years, when they know distinctly in which Government they may enter for the Land. (Byrd 181)
- 17 As it extends westward, the line brings legal certainty. Byrd describes how people gather every day to meet the party of surveyors and learn to which colony they belong (Byrd 88). Disputes are unambiguously settled and new colonists are allowed to “enter for the land.” Later on, farther to the west, Byrd’s way of looking at the wilderness is profoundly shaped by his conscience of the upcoming changes: even as he is surrounded by the forest, what he sees around him is a region that will soon become a well-settled area.
- 18 The line emerges in Byrd’s writing as the main agent of this transformation. As the “axe-men” clear the way and blaze the trees near the line, it becomes a sort of vista

running from the sea to the mountains. This is nowhere more evident than at this crucial moment when the party finally decides to stop going west and to turn back. The key question is to decide which route they are going to follow. They can either go north and follow the crest of the mountains, in order to ascertain the exact position of certain streams and rivers whose location and origin remain a mystery, or they can just follow the line. Pressed as they are by the arrival of winter, the members of the party choose to walk back in their tracks:

Such considerations as these determin'd us at last to make the best of our way back upon the line, which was the Straitest, and Consequently the shortest way to the Inhabitants. We knew the worst of that Course, and were sure of a beaten Path all the way, while we were totally ignorant of what Difficulties and Dangers the other Course might be attended with. (Byrd 238-240)

- 19 This is Euclidian geometry applied to American geography: the shortest path between two points is a straight line. Well-trodden and blazed by the members of the expedition, the boundary line turns into a line of communication—an axis and a channel along which streams of people and goods can move back and forth. The abstract and immaterial geometrical line enlarges to become a pathway. Even as it separates the two colonies north and south of its axis, the line points in the direction of the West.

The line as vector

- 20 Not only does the line work as a static boundary that brings order and control over the land, but, ultimately, it also becomes a *vector*, in the dynamic sense of the word: the line is an arrow, a dynamic diagram channeling energies westward. Surveying a straight line is a very singular way of moving through the land. While hunters, for example, aim for a specific hunting ground, and pioneers try to reach a fertile area, the surveyors of a straight line through the wilderness penetrate the continent along a geometrical axis without the slightest idea of what lies ahead. It is a mode of traveling that is at the same time with and without a purpose: what matters here is not the destination, but the journey itself. The line is a vector in that it shows a direction: it points toward a hypothetical object (the West) that is not so much the end of the journey as its engine, the energy that propels the small party in its direction.¹²
- 21 The surveying party forms the head of this arrow of penetration embodied by the line. As this arrow runs deeper and deeper into the land, it leaves the area of white settlement. Symbolical thresholds are crossed: one day, they realize that the last church is now behind them (Byrd 104). Later, they discover they have reached a point where they cannot buy food from any settler, but are forced to hire Indian hunters to get something to eat.
- 22 The line then becomes an axis of discovery that gradually reveals unknown land formations and rivers. The members of the expedition find themselves in an Adamic situation where they are free to give names to these new topographical features. The names bestowed by the Byrd expedition range from the very trivial (a mountain is named “the Wart” – Byrd 214) to the masculine joke (a river is christened “Matrimony creek” because it is very noisy – Byrd 214) to self-tribute (“we came upon a large branch of the River, which we christen'd the Irvin, in honour of our learned Professor.” – Byrd 212). Naming is a form of appropriation and a specific mode of “marking” the

land that goes well beyond the appropriative process of acquiring land for productive and lucrative purposes.¹³ Naming implies an intimate relationship in which the subject transfers his own mental representations to the thing he names through the use of a toponym. It is a confrontation: the members of the expedition come face-to-face with topographical features they have never heard of. These are mapped and thus become part of the mental framework of the European colonists. Byrd and his men are discoverers of a brand new world; the Indian guides they hire count for nothing in their world-view.

23 Even though Byrd takes great care to appear perfectly self-controlled and not the least affected by the potential symbolic force of what he encounters,¹⁴ his text reveals the trouble he sometimes feels in his encounter with natural elements. His confrontation with the land is not deprived of sensuality. For example, Byrd concludes his entry for October 18th with this remark: “on the highest of all rose a Single Mountain, very much resembling a Woman’s Breast” (Byrd 214). Set as it is at the end of a separate entry, the sentence stands out and suggests the author’s confusion; the wilderness is discovered as potentially sensual and arousing. This can probably be linked to the well-known feminine metaphor, identified by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land*, comparing the New World to a woman. The *terra incognita* can take the appearance of a nourishing mother, as in Byrd’s pastoral reveries, or, alternatively, of a sexually attractive feminine body which the pioneers feel the urge to possess. The members of this men-only expedition look at the wild world around them with a gaze that is, at times, filled with lust and desire; their attitude toward women, which several times borders on rape and assault,¹⁵ reflects their attitude toward the land, penetrated by the undeviating geometrical line. The line, as vector, also channels the sexual energy of the members of the party—and more generally, their desire to possess the land.

24 Deep in the forest, far from the settlements, a process of transformation takes place that announces the one to be famously described by Frederick Jackson Turner nearly two centuries later in the conference he gave at the close of the Frontier:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips him off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick. (Turner 4)

25 Men who go west and live on the Frontier are transformed by their first-hand experience of the wilderness; they become less European and more “American”, according to Turner. Byrd describes something very similar. For example, when he and his men find themselves deep in the forest, they witness the strange effects of bear meat, which is thought to be an aphrodisiac: “whoever makes a Supper of it”, says Byrd, “will certainly dream of a Woman, or the Devil, or both”. (Byrd 252). The power (including the sexual energy¹⁶) attributed to the figure of the bear, a ubiquitous animal in these woods, is supposedly transferred to the men who eat it. In other words, to eat a bear is to become a bear; to go into the wild, is to grow wild. And Byrd’s text reveals a certain fascination for this experience of “going wild”: for him, such a close relationship with the land is an integral part of the process of settlement. His intent is thus always twofold: from a pragmatic point of view, it is necessary to survey the land in order to know precisely where valuable natural resources are located; but, beyond

that, on a more personal level, it is just as important for every settler to have an intimate knowledge of the land.

- 26 This explains why Byrd spends several pages at the end of the *History* giving very practical advice to the future pioneers who will eventually conquer this wild region. It is necessary to explore the area and know it well, he writes, otherwise “we shall be Strangers to our own Country” (Byrd 260). “Our Country”, he goes on, “has now been inhabited more than 130 years by the English, and still we hardly know any thing of the Appalachian Mountains, that are no where above 250 miles from the sea”, while the French, for example, have ranged “almost as far as California”. As he moves westward, Byrd realizes how vital it is for English (or should we now say American?) settlers to develop a strong relationship with the land. The line indicates the direction of the new focal point of Byrd’s intent. As the ridge of the Alleghenies slowly appears on the horizon, he finds himself irresistibly attracted westward. This attraction, fueled by the line as a dynamic vector, can be read as a variation on the binary opposition identified by Pierre-Yves Pétillon in American fiction writing: on the one hand the line of enclosure protects me from the terrifying openness of the wilderness; it brings structure and order into a world characterized by chaos and confusion. But, on the other hand, the rigid boundaries of the linear grid form a *plot* in which I can feel trapped and ensnared—which in turn leads me to consider the open space that lies ahead as an area of freedom (Pétillon 187). For Byrd, the two feelings are simultaneous: the line brings order and structure, but it is also an invitation to “enter” the land (in an almost biblical sense) and take possession of it.
- 27 At the beginning of his journey, Byrd felt reluctant to leave the area of white settlement. Just before leaving the Atlantic shore, he noted: “I often cast a longing Eye towards England, & Sigh’d” (Byrd 45). England was still the symbolical center of his universe. Later, however, things evolve, and the center of gravity of his world gradually shifts westward. Even as the North-Carolinians leave the party, considering that the line is now long enough, Byrd decides to stay with his men and to carry it as far as they can. Here again, his motivation is twofold: the practical, appropriative curiosity of the planter urges him to take advantage of his journey through uncharted territory, but he and his men also feel a more personal, intimate desire to keep moving westward (Byrd 179-181). Characteristically, the final moment when Byrd has to turn back is marked by a frenzy of blazing: “The last Tree we markt was a Red Oak, growing on the Bank of the River; and to make the Place more remarkable, we blaz’d all the Trees around it”. (Byrd 234). Byrd and his men desperately wanted to reach the mountains to see what lay beyond, just as Moses finally caught a glimpse of the Promised Land. The numerous marks engraved on these lonely trees in the middle of the forest seem to express their frustration. Their journey westward has intimately altered their perception of the continent.

Conclusion

- 28 In Byrd’s texts, the line goes through strange, unexpected metamorphoses. From a simple boundary line, it turns into a dynamic diagram working on a much larger scale and at a much deeper level. Byrd’s text is an invaluable source of data concerning the emergence of the colonial upper South in the early eighteenth century, but it also

reveals how surveying expeditions and cartographic projects such as this one profoundly shaped the way the colonists considered their environment.

- 29 From a historical point of view, the straight line surveyed by Byrd and his companions prefigures the realization, sixty years later, of Jefferson's project of a rectangular survey system superimposed over the entire territory. After the Land Ordinance (1785), thousands of official surveyors were sent in the Northwest Territory and then throughout the continent to draw new straight lines in the forests and deserts of America.¹⁷ Along these lines new states were created, fields were drawn and roads were built. As Catherine Maumi suggests, this links the infinitely small with the infinitely large (Maumi 122): the small, perishable marks blazed on the trees in the middle of the forest later became the underlying infrastructure of the national, continental-wide superstructure of trails, railroad lines, and eventually highways spanning the continent in one immense network.
- 30 The Byrd expedition also prefigures the survey of another straight line: the Mason-Dixon Line between Maryland and Pennsylvania, surveyed forty years later between 1763 and 1768. As Thomas Pynchon suggests in his novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997), at a national level, the survey of these straight lines was an ambivalent achievement. They symbolized the shift towards a more structured conception of space and settled disputes between the colonies; this paved the way for the birth of the new nation, and allowed its westward expansion throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, at the same time, these lines were also lines of separation—cracks on the surface of the continent and in the nation, as shown by the Mason-Dixon line which later became the symbolic border between the North and the South. At a more personal and individual level, though, both Byrd's texts and Pynchon's novel suggest how deeply these surveys altered the representational and discursive frameworks through which early Americans envisioned their relationship with the land.

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NOTES

1. For a detailed account of the boundary dispute and its economical and territorial implications, see William K. Boyd's introduction to the 1929 edition of William Byrd's *Histories*. A website also offers an illustrated presentation of the border dispute: <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/boundaries/ncboundary.html>.

2. Marambaud offers a brief description of the setting in which the Byrd survey took place: see Marambaud, 228.

3. David Smith offers a detailed analysis of the pyramidal structure of the party: see Smith, 300-303.

4. For more information on Byrd, see Pierre Marambaud's *William Byrd of Westover, 1674-1744* (1977), which remains the best available biography of William Byrd II. For information on Byrd's cultural background and colonial America in general, see articles collected by Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, especially Richard L. Bushman's "American High-Style and Vernacular Cultures."

5. See Maude H. Woodfin's 1944 article for the complete story of how Byrd's secret text was discovered. It is probable that the secret text was written *before* the *History*: the abbreviations in spelling and the lack of detail suggest it was probably Byrd's first version of the story, maybe drawn from a journal he kept during the expedition.
6. Several critics have commented on Byrd's complex relationship with secrecy, especially as related to his famous diaries written in cyphered shorthand. Douglas Anderson analyses Byrd's contradictory "secrets" (Anderson, 702), while Norman S. Grabo comments on Byrd's "masquerade" and paradoxically suggests that Byrd is more contrived in the *Secret History* (usually considered as more open and revealing) than in the carefully revised *History* (Grabo 95).
7. Not that such a discovery profoundly altered the toponymy, however: the place is still known today as *Knott's Island*.
8. The phrase was used by Governor Spotswood of Virginia, in 1714, to describe the intolerable situation in the border region. See William K. Boyd's introduction (Byrd xx), as well as Byrd's remarks on the subject (Byrd 56-58).
9. Douglas Anderson comments on the instability of the border region as a place of transformation and change: see Anderson, 707-709 and 715.
10. Several commentators have focused on the importance of the notion of order in Byrd's writings. For Kenneth A. Requa, Byrd's attitude toward the West is deeply informed by his need to impose order on the land (see Requa 59-61). Geoffrey Kaeuper takes up Requa's analysis and links Byrd's focus on order to his aristocratic position both in the surveying party and in the hierarchy of his colony (Kaeuper 130-131).
11. See also Byrd, 66. In her detailed study of Byrd's writings, Susan Manning focuses on the complex notions of Industry and Idleness in Byrd's world-view. She emphasizes the role played by the line in Byrd's mental and moral representations. See Manning, 182-186.
12. As David Smith notes, the line also informs the way the environment as a whole is perceived: "Due to the unique nature of the progress of this kind of survey, we see the environment not as a single, elaborately framed landscape in conventional perspective, but as a *continuum in time*." (Smith 305). The traditional pastoral landscape that Byrd sometimes superimposes on the land is set in motion and propelled forward by the very nature of the line as a dynamic diagram. There is a shift from a static, framed landscape to an irresistible movement westward.
13. On this subject, see for example Pascale Smorag's 2009 book on American toponymy: "we can assume that toponymy works as an autobiography of the people itself, each name-giver adding his own signature" (Smorag 10) (my translation of: "*on peut donc supposer que la toponymie constitue une autobiographie du peuple lui-même, chaque intervenant apposant sa propre signature*").
14. See Requa, 63-64.
15. The *Secret History* famously illustrates Byrd's keen eye for female charms. Byrd never reveals any lapse in behavior on his part, but he often narrates instances in which his fellow commissioners proved unable to control their appetite for physical pleasure. A certain number of milkmaids and Indian women (i.e. women of inferior rank) are victims of sexual assault. Most of the time, Byrd sounds rather self-righteous in his solemn condemnations of such behavior, but sometimes he also seems to be entertained by these situations, and humorously hides the men's sexual drive behind the false pretense of naturalist interest. For example, after a night in an Indian village during which some of the men obviously did not sleep alone, he notes: "I cou'd discern by some of our Gentlemen's Linnen, discolour'd by the Soil [= *body paint*] of the Indian Ladys, that they had been convincing themselves in the point of their having no furr" (Byrd 123).
16. Byrd offers a humorous account of its effect, especially on the chaplain of the expedition: "if any Indian woman did not prove with child at a decent time after Marriage, the Husband, to save his Reputation with the women, forthwith entered into a Bear-dyet for Six Weeks, which in that time makes him so vigorous that he grows exceedingly impertinent to his poor wife and 'tis great odds but he makes her a Mother in Nine Months. And thus I am able to say, besides, for the

Reputation of the Bear Dyet, that all the Married men of our Company were joyful Fathers within forty weeks after they got Home, and most of the Single men had children sworn to them within the same time, our chaplain always excepted, who, with much ado, made a shift to cast out that importunate kind of Devil, by Dint of Fasting and Prayer.” (Byrd 252).

17. On the history of the survey of the American continent, see Linklater’s *Measuring America* (2002), which contains a stimulating presentation of the complex link between measurement and land-ownership in American history.

ABSTRACTS

In the text now known as the *Histories of the Dividing line*, William Byrd II narrates the survey, in 1728, of the straight line marking the Virginia-North Carolina border. This paper explores the role played by the motif of the line in Byrd’s writing, and how it shaped his representation of the world as the surveying expedition gradually left the area of white settlement and penetrated the wilderness. In Byrd’s writing, the line becomes much more than just a boundary line; this paper offers a reading of the line as an instrument of order and stability (both social and cartographic), but also as a tool of control and appropriation, and eventually as a vector propelling the colonists westward.

Dans le texte connu aujourd’hui sous le nom *Histories of the Dividing line*, le planteur virginien William Byrd raconte l’arpentage d’une frontière rectiligne entre deux colonies américaines en 1728. Cet article s’intéresse au rôle que joue le motif de la ligne dans l’écriture de Byrd, et à la façon dont il influence sa représentation du monde au fur et à mesure que l’expédition d’arpentage s’éloigne de la région habitée par les colons européens et s’enfonce dans la forêt. Dans l’écriture de Byrd, la ligne devient bien plus qu’une simple frontière ; cet article propose de la lire en premier lieu comme un instrument d’ordre et de stabilité (à la fois social et cartographique), mais aussi comme un outil de contrôle et d’appropriation, et enfin comme un vecteur indiquant la direction de l’Ouest.

INDEX

Keywords: line, boundary line, geography, geometry, space, Virginia, North Carolina

Mots-clés: ligne, frontière, géographie, géométrie, espace, Virginie, Caroline du Nord

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