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*"Circumstances Are Destiny": An Antebellum Woman's Struggle  
to Define Sphere (review)*

Katharine Antolini

West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies, New Series, Volume  
1, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 93-95 (Review)

Published by West Virginia University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wvh.2008.0018>



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## Book Reviews

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*“Circumstances Are Destiny”: An Antebellum Woman’s Struggle to Define Sphere.* By Tina Stewart Brakebill. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006. Pp. xx, 255.)

In *“Circumstances Are Destiny,”* Tina Stewart Brakebill undertakes the daunting task of constructing a woman’s life through her public and private writings. Celestia Rice Colby, a wife and mother living in nineteenth-century Ohio, had dreams that stretched beyond life on a rural dairy farm. She recorded those dreams in over six hundred pages of diary entries. But like most antebellum women, real life and its domestic responsibilities obstructed the obtainment of those dreams. Colby thus searched for an alternative means of expression in over two hundred published essays and stories. According to Brakebill, Colby saw her life irreparably divided between the ideal world of her dreams and the real world that relegated women to the domestic sphere of life. Despite the bravado that ultimately drove her public stance on reform issues, including women’s rights, she privately felt helpless to change the reality of her everyday life.

Brakebill’s conceptual framework is an intriguing feature of her research and provides historical depth to an “ordinary” woman’s life. It is a framework she adapts from Colby’s own attempt to explain the boundaries of her life. For example, Colby peppered her diary with references to an inner life or world versus an outer one. In an 1858 diary entry she explained: “I am a strange incomprehensible being, and live in a hidden world. My outward and inner life are not the same, they have no points of resemblance. Like two vast continents, they are separated by an ocean of mystery.” Three years later she continued to privately ponder that familiar theme by asking, “How strange and unaccountable is the hidden life? Will the outer and inner life ever be harmonized? Or are we created to be only the spot of destiny?” Colby’s awareness of her conflicted worlds allows Brakebill to identify the circumstances that lessened or enhanced her inability to reconcile them throughout her life. In other words, Brakebill successfully navigates that “ocean of mystery” to reveal Colby’s lifetime struggle to define the boundaries of her female existence.

Essentially, Brakebill reveals a public and private persona created through Colby's writing. Privately, she ached for something more than the life of a wife and mother on an Ohio dairy farm. She wondered if her life would ever amount to more than one of domestic toil and obligation. Her education had exposed her once to a world beyond the domestic sphere for women--a world of literature, engaging conversation among female contemporaries, and issues of social justice. Once she married and settled into the adult life expected of her, however, she mourned the loss of a more fulfilling life. "Oh why was I even born?" she asked, if the extent of her usefulness was her ability to "cook, wash dishes, and other household drudgery."

Her published works bare another side of Celestia Rice Colby. Brakebill traces the evolution of her public persona from a tentative advocate of reform to a confident woman willing to write on abolition, temperance, and women's rights. Colby's public persona lacked the paralyzing self-doubt and helplessness often expressed in her private journals; her public courage did not translate into her real life. "Her public words represented the hopes innate to her inner life," explains Brakebill, "but her private reflections demonstrated her actual life, her outer world, which continued to fall short of her hopeful expectations."

The lives of Colby's children ultimately rivaled the independent public persona cultivated in her published works. Her surviving son and two daughters attended college and sought careers in the fields of engineering, medicine, and teaching, respectively. The children accredited their success to their mother's guidance, apparently unaware of the inner turmoil that plagued Colby her entire life. According to Brakebill, only at the end of her life did Colby bridge the breach between her personal longings and a genuine public outlet. While living with her daughter in Illinois, presumably freed from a contemptuous marriage and everything that it represented, Colby finally found a home among the like-minded women she sought since girlhood. She blossomed as a single woman welcomed into prestigious women's clubs that stood on the principle of women's intellectual equality to men. She came as close as she ever would to her ideal outer world.

Although thoroughly researched and well written, Brakebill's analysis of Colby's writings is periodically buried under pages of sometimes tedious historical detail. The demands of a full-length book required the "filling" of lengthy pauses in Colby's published and private writings with intricate discussions of historical events and facts. This larger discussion, no doubt deemed necessary to provide context to the popular reader, slows the reading of the story and often dilutes the power of Colby's words--they are either

overshadowed or dulled by redundancy. Overall, however, Brakebill writes a compelling account of Colby's life. The reader is easily intrigued by Colby's tortured yearning to reach beyond the societal boundaries which restricted the lives of nineteenth-century women.

Katharine Antolini  
West Virginia University

*The Boundaries between Us: Natives and Newcomers along the Frontiers of the Old Northwest Territory, 1750-1850.* Edited by Daniel P. Barr. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006. Pp. xix, 261.)

Daniel P. Barr's collection of eleven essays entitled *The Boundaries between Us* stands as a testament to the transformation of Native American and frontier scholarship by the "new Indian historians." Inspired by Richard White's seminal 1991 study of the Great Lakes Indians entitled *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, historians have been chronicling the fluid cultural interaction between Euro-Americans and native peoples on the American frontier for over fifteen years. In many ways, Barr's essayists are the products of White's efforts to break from historical convention and "place Indian peoples at the center" of their own history (White, *Middle Ground*, xi). In *The Boundaries between Us*, Barr has assembled essays that build upon White's methodologies in order to examine "the sociocultural context in which natives and newcomers lived, traded, negotiated, interacted, and fought" (xii).

Ian K. Steele's opening essay, "The Shawnees and the English: Captives and War, 1753-1765," demonstrates the "new Indian history" by connecting the capture and harsh treatment of Shawnee Indians by British colonial authorities in South Carolina to the tribe's decision to fight alongside the French during the Seven Years' War. Steele's willingness to identify the cultural and personal reasons motivating the Franco-Shawnee alliance challenges the orthodox arguments that the tribe sided with the French because they were vicious, greedy, or easily manipulated. Daniel Barr's "'This Land Is Ours and Not Yours'" also affords the Western Delaware agency in their decision to ally with the French during the Seven Years' War. Barr argues that the Western Delaware were not simply "pawns of the French," but participated in the conflict as a direct "response to the past removal experiences" by the British and as a violent effort "not to be migrants again" (25-26). Both Steele and Barr reject past historical characterizations of natives as helpless victims in colonial warfare, and portray both the Shawnee and