

Constructing National Subjectivity: The Preservation of Wilderness Environment and the Construction of National Identity in the Texts of John James Audubon

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Abstract

During the early national period of New England, the discourse of wilderness environment constituted not only a specifically American **nature**, but also a distinct concept of an American **nation**. Most of the traditional critics in the late nineteenth and twentieth century contended that early environmental discourse in America interconnected a unique national subject (American Adam) with a representative national environment (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness). The composite outcome of the interaction of these images was the ideological and nationalistic entity -- Nature's Nation; and such an entity was principally founded on the conquest of a Virgin Wilderness.

Different from the readings of these traditional critics, this paper attempts to show that in constructing American national subjectivity, what we recognize today as a precursor of American nature -- John James Audubon -- in turn played a crucial and still largely unexamined role. Audubon was aware that wilderness environment could accomplish the work of constructing national subjectivity not through its *conquest*, but through its *preservation*. Gradually, this alternative strategy of national construction helped introduce a pattern of ecological thinking in American culture and offered an alternative to the dominant expansionary ethos of the age, and thereby helped initiate a minority tradition of environmental concern into early American literary history.

Key Words: the construction of American national subjectivity, wilderness preservation, environmental concern, John James Audubon