

## On Being German in British America: The Materiality of Identity Aesthetics

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Motion connotes movement. The movement of peoples across time and space, for example, draws on diffusionist and diasporic models. Motion suggests cultural exchange fueling narratives of colonialism, assimilation, acculturation, and resistance. Motion is understood as recurring bodily practices sparking meditations on performance, habitus, and everydayness. All of these iterations rely on expressive culture—objects, language, speech, foodways, and performance—to plot and map topographies of culture. Cultural cartographics do political work in the sense that they enable borders of inclusion and exclusion all too often translated into mandates for racial purity and social hierarchy. What I wish to address, however, is the idea of motion as the strategic deployment of objects in conversational fields. In this formulation, motion resides at the heart of the production, reception, and comprehension of objects and is revealed in the myriad ways that objects enable tangible conversations about materiality and identity. These conversations are rooted in an aesthetics of everyday life, determined not by the imposition of standards of beauty but by the fact of comportment—the balance of how people and objects interact in the realm of the ordinary. The objects in motion that inform this conversation are gravestones standing in Lutheran and Reformed Pennsylvania-German churchyards in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Stone markers punctuate the eighteenth-century Lutheran and Reformed churchyards and burial grounds of Pennsylvania German congregations. They spill down the hillside of Bergstrasse Evangelical Lutheran Church near Ephrata, fan across the level terrain behind the Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brickerville, and crowd the fences at Muddy Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Cocalico Valley. They shoulder together in crowded ranks at New Jerusalem and shelter behind stone walls at St. Johns. They range in material from slate to sandstone and in finish from rough-hewn blocks to elaborately finished stelae. The smallest poke scant inches above the grass, the largest soar four to five feet in height and are up to four inches thick. Grave markers in each of these cemeteries reflect a range of textual inscriptions. Some are carved front and back with precise information including not only name and birth and death dates but also the European origins of the deceased and the Biblical verse that anchored the funeral sermon. Others gravestones, richly carved with decorative elements, are devoid of text. The latter, with their conspicuous lack of text, provide the starting point for our discussion. Read as objects in motion these markers tell us about being German in British America through the operations of material conversations.