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# History before the Fact; or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony

**Myra Jehlen**

COLONIES (OUR). Register sadness in speaking of them.

—GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*

“It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians.”

—QUEEQUEG, HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby-Dick*

I myself had Indian blood in me. My grandmother is a Carib Indian. That makes me one-quarter Carib Indian. But I don’t go around saying that I have some Indian blood in me. . . .

Mariah says, “I have Indian blood in me,” and underneath everything I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?

—JAMAICA KINCAID, *Lucy*

The description of one’s current writing as “work in progress” can be a little depressing. One reason lies in the evocation of the mountain still to climb, of course, but another, more subversive reason is that the notion of progress seems mockingly inaccurate to describe the experience

I read a first version of this essay at the University of Rome, a second at the Brown Symposium of Southwestern University, Stanford University, and the University of California, Santa Cruz, a third at Dartmouth College, and a fourth at Vanderbilt University. I benefited greatly from very useful responses on all four occasions.

of writing, which is seldom so anticipatory. Typically, one proceeds by retreating, first from the ignorant certainty that generates a hypothesis, then to a better informed agnosticism until, if all goes well, in an ecstasy of interrogation, one achieves full-blown skepticism. Paranoia is an occupational disease in this profession: there is always a prior plot, some yet-unexposed premise structuring a deceptively self-evident meaning. One advances backward into irony, the goal being finally to pose a basic question that turns over the ground of previous convictions.

This unsettling dynamic is nowhere more active than in the study of the literature of American colonization, whose subject is origins and the representation of origins. And foundational accounts are the most suspect of all. Accordingly, historians of the year 1492 and all that have been approaching the representations of the origins of the New World as utterly unreliable narratives, antiscritures to be read against. This would appear definitively skeptical, but in dealing only with the content of the imperial narratives, this skepticism leaves their form unquestioned. While suggesting, therefore, that it is possible to disbelieve in ways that formally resemble believing it all, I want to propose one more step back from the conventional certainties of colonial history beyond a different account to a different *kind* of account.

## I

The early works of revisionary colonial history were often revelatory. Their drama depended in part on the complacency of the historical vision they challenged, which may be represented, only a little simplistically, by the writings of Samuel Eliot Morison, for whom Columbus was an epic hero and the annexation of the American continents a romance in which “the New World gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering Castilians.”<sup>1</sup> For Morison and his colleagues, the discovery of America was an epiphany and its colonization at once inevitable and glorious. They saw the Europeanization of America enacting the natural historical progress of civilization.

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston, 1942), p. 236; quoted in Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London, 1986), p. 158; hereafter abbreviated *CE*.

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The very title of Edmundo O’Gorman’s 1961 *Invention of America* repudiated all that, and not just the established interpretation of the discovery but the very fact. O’Gorman argued that there had been no “discovery”—certainly not by the Italian sea captain who himself denied to his death that he had found a new world, but not even by those who did recognize that America was not Asia. Amerigo Vespucci carried off the prize of making the New World his namesake not by claiming the discovery but by inventing it, retroactively.<sup>2</sup>

When everyone agrees that in 1492 Columbus crossed the ocean and came upon a land hitherto unknown to Europe (or once known but at the time forgotten), the difference between “discovery” and “invention” may not appear very significant. But it is nothing less than the difference between destiny and history. Calling the New World landfall a discovery or an invention means that the historian will either unfold a providential narrative or develop an interpretation. With O’Gorman’s book, the original moment of American history ceased to be an epiphany and became an event whose significance would lie in its interpretation. The new scholarship was thus revelatory in revealing a myth; since this was a myth about a revelation, the process of its exposure was especially ironic, suggesting that the historians were approaching intellectual bedrock.

I do not want to exaggerate the darkness before this light. There is certainly a long and powerful tradition of examining basic terms in the discipline of American studies; Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* in 1950, for instance, and R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* in 1955 were precisely about uncovering foundational assumptions. But even as *Virgin Land* and *The American Adam* demystified the national myths of origin, they tacitly accepted the very first myth, the story of a discovery in which Europeans were the sole agents at a transcendent moment of human progress. Perry Miller’s definition of his life’s work as unfolding “the massive narrative of the movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America” has appropriately become the set piece of his generation.<sup>3</sup>

The current generation’s set piece, on the other hand, could be the epigraph with which Peter Hulme begins his highly influential *Colonial Encounters* (1986).<sup>4</sup> The epigraph quotes the Bishop of Avila telling Queen Isabella of Castile in 1492 that “language is the perfect instrument

2. See Edmundo O’Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1961).

3. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. vii. See also Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), and R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955).

4. When I presented one version of this essay at a conference on the discovery of America held at Vanderbilt University in October 1992, by a fortunate coincidence Peter Hulme was present. The ensuing discussion was for me remarkably illuminating and entered deeply into the revised essay published here.

of empire.”<sup>5</sup> The bishop’s dictum encompasses the book’s two-part thesis: first, that empire building was the center of Europe’s interest in the New World (Morison, among others, listed empire as only one of a long list of inspirations, along with adventure, curiosity, and the quest for knowledge); and, second, that the narratives of colonization were essential to its progress. *Colonial Encounters* derives its historical evidence from a collection of colonial texts read closely and comparatively. “Language is the perfect instrument [for constructing an] empire”—and therefore for its dismantling.

The epigraph thus signals not only the thesis of the study but also its logic. It is to this logic that the rest of my discussion is addressed. I take *Colonial Encounters* as an exemplary work in discursive history, a masterly demonstration of this mode, all the more compelling for its author’s stipulation that there is more to history than discourse and that historical narratives have in view a reality that is in part material. Yet, beginning with his epigraph, Hulme casts language as so powerfully instrumental that the deconstruction of narratives tends to co-opt his universe of explanation. My concern with this tendency lies in its corollary effects, with how, when critical readings co-opt the universe of explanation, explanations become either utterly impossible—because texts are utterly unreliable—or entirely certain, because texts are also entirely accessible.

Carlo Ginzburg has recently described the first of these effects: the way the analysis of narrative evidence taken to be by definition unreliable becomes incapable of arriving at explanations. While positivist historians dealt with evidence “as an open window,” he writes, “contemporary skeptics regard it as a wall, which by definition precludes any access to reality.”<sup>6</sup> As I read them, some of the current histories of colonization do the reverse: they break down the “wall” and render the narrative once again an open window. Unreliability, if one thinks one understands its principle, can be decoded to reveal a narrative that now appears entirely reliable. The principle of unreliability in colonial narratives seems clear to many anticolonial historians today who, indeed, consider their work to be participating in a project of decolonization. Some of the resulting histories

5. Ivan Illich gives a detailed account of this incident in “Vernacular Values,” chapter 2 of his *Shadow Work* (Boston, 1981). Illich sees the grammar, the work of Elio Antonio de Nebrija who was a classical scholar (his first book in 1482 was a Latin grammar) turned to the study of vernacular languages, as an instrument of control, a “declaration of war” against the vernacular and for the universal. The grammar (published just fifteen days after Columbus sailed) is called *Gramática Castellana* and is intended to make it possible for the queen to replace the language of her subjects with her own. Nebrija proposes a union between the sword and the learned man, the *letrado* in the conquest of the empire: an army of *armas y letras*. For Illich, therefore, Columbus and Nebrija represent the same development. Jim Hicks called *Shadow Work* to my attention.

6. Carlo Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991): 83.

demonstrate the possibility for a radical uncertainty unanchored by material evidence to transmute, sometimes within the same essay, into an equal and opposite radical certainty. For instance, the proposition that "language is the perfect instrument of empire" does not lead in *Colonial Encounters* to uncertainty but, on the contrary, to what seems to me an excessive certainty. I want first to describe this process and then, in the second part of this essay, to suggest how its determinism may be somewhat tempered.

The first indication that the bishop's proposition has inspired an excessive certainty is that Peter Hulme seems to take it at face value. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether the bishop was right; and even before that, what he meant, since it would appear unlikely that the words he used—*language, perfect, instrument, empire*—had exactly the same meaning in the fifteenth century as they have now. The occasion being the presentation to the Spanish queen of the first grammar of a modern European language—prompting her to ask, "What is it for?"—could the bishop have been just boasting in order to inflate the importance of his learned class?

Hulme does not pose this question but instead treats the statement "language is the perfect instrument of empire" as a truth to be elaborated. At the same time, by not questioning the bishop's motive, Hulme implies the prelate is a clear-eyed exploiter of linguistic power. There is a certain circularity verging on the tautological in the way the bishop and his statement testify to one another's villainy. The accuracy of the boast means that the bishop is not just boasting but is genuinely corrupt, that he is a man of letters and ideals willing to prostitute his learning to political and commercial greed. At the same time, one of the reasons to believe the statement is that it is spoken by a bishop implicated in the imperialist cause and in a setting of political and commercial greed; thus the bishop and his statement establish both one another's historical truth and moral duplicity. The bishop is as false as his dictum is true; the space between man and statement is not a stage for interactions that might qualify our understanding of both but only the site of his self-exposure.

In the construction of a history, tautology expresses itself as teleology, depicting the past such that it leads to what we already know to be its future. And the same condition obtains in both linguistic tautology and historical teleology, that is, a determinism that appropriates agency for its own vision. Against all odds, *Colonial Encounters* projects a vision of the bishop hardly less prophetic than Morison's discoverer; of course, Hulme's bishop foresees the opposite prophecy: not life but death.

Yet Hulme is himself entirely clear about the need to avoid such reversals. Explaining that the Spanish account of a divided Caribbean inhabited by both gentle and violent peoples was an invention intended to rationalize colonial policy, he notes that "the temptation at this point . . . is simply to reverse the colonialist terms and to replace the tra-

ditional story with its negative image.” He rejects such a move, which “would be merely another way of falling victim to those colonialist categories, and taking the native Caribbean out of history altogether.” Instead, he offers “a hypothetical sketch . . . of . . . an alternative reading of some of the historical and ethnographic material” (*CE*, pp. 73, 78). This sketch, which focusses on the institution of the chiefdom, replaces the binary arrangement of radically different cultures (justifying both the expectation of easy conquest and the necessity of violent suppression) with the picture of a unified Caribbean culture whose variations have nothing to do with allegories of good and evil but arise out of the usual territorial conflicts.

This substitutes for the Spanish account one that is at least as plausible and of a more reliable provenance. But Hulme now worries that his picture of a single, if varied, culture may be at odds with the Arawaks’ clearly adversarial report that the Caribs were cannibals. It may require more than a plausible alternative reading to counter the support this claim lends to the colonialist view of things. So Hulme puts the question squarely: “Were the Caribs . . . really cannibals?” (*CE*, p. 78). His pursuit of a factual answer offers an exceptionally subtle illustration of the logic of discourse-based history.

The first step is to reject the form of the question for being “superogatory” in that the words *Carib* and *cannibal* are derived from one another. To the recast question “‘Did the Caribs really, as a matter of custom and practice, eat human flesh?’” the first answer is, “‘We do not know,’” there being no conclusive evidence for or against (*CE*, p. 79). But then Hulme cautions that by itself this response is misleading. He provides two glosses, one historical, one textual. A rehearsal of the historical literature of anthropophagy provides a series of traditional explanations for the consumption of human flesh ranging from vice to ferocity to primitive superstition to protein deficiency. The discussion has progressed from a question of fact (did the Caribs eat people?) to a factual answer (“we don’t know”) to an elaboration of this answer taking into consideration what would be implied by interpreting “we don’t know” as “possibly yes.” And this implication—that the indigenous Caribbeans were ferocious savages or, improbably, desperate for meat—weighs very heavily against contemplating any sort of yes.

At this stage, to counterbalance the racist anthropology he has been rehearsing, Hulme cites the work of the anthropologist William Arens, whose analysis of the fallacies of the literature led him to deny that there was any solid evidence that cannibalism ever existed.<sup>7</sup> With this, the historical answer “we don’t know” has become a textual “the reports are false” (my phrase, not Hulme’s); and Hulme now discards “we don’t know”

7. See William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York, 1979).

because “simply to answer ‘non-proven,’ even to the reformulated question, is still to acquiesce to the implicit violence of colonialist discourse” (CE, p. 81). Thus “the reports are false” slides into something like “we should positively reject the false reports.”

This slide marks the transition from the historical gloss to the textual one, the evolution of the concept of cannibalism in modern Western writing. A survey of both the psychoanalytical and the anthropological literatures leads Hulme to observe that there exists a “widespread desire for the existence of some touchstone of the absolutely ‘other’” and that this desire is perfectly satisfied by the image of the cannibal. With this second set of qualifications, the material question of whether there were Caribbeans who ate their fellows has moved entirely into the realm of the European imaginary. The passage concludes that “only now . . . is it possible to undertake the specific task of defining the signified of ‘cannibalism,’ thereby relocating the argument on to the plane of discourse, and reasserting the historical matrix of semantic questions” (CE, p. 83).

This “historical matrix,” however, is entirely discursive, composed of “semantic questions” whose material referents dropped out of consideration when “we don’t know” turned into “the reports are false.” The argument, located wholly on “the plane of discourse,” now moves under the impulse of logic, *not history*, to its inevitable answer: “If there is any ground at all [to the claim of Caribbean cannibalism] then the earlier definition of cannibalism can be glossed to the effect that the threat it offers, although figured as the devouring of human flesh, is in fact addressed to the body politic itself” (CE, p. 87). In other words, cannibalism almost certainly did not exist; but if it did, it was a figure of speech and moreover one that points to the guilt not of the Carib but of his oppressor. The discussion closes with the entirely figurative explication of the cannibal as one on whom is projected the violence of the body politic that is about to devour him. If cannibals did exist in the Caribbean, we know who they were.<sup>8</sup>

*Figuratively*, this seems entirely justified; I have no dispute with Hulme’s analysis of the *discourse* of cannibalism. But while he establishes that *cannibalism* “is a term that has no application outside the discourse of European colonialism” (in that it means not just eating human flesh but eating it “ferociously” [CE, pp. 84, 83]), he still has not answered his own factual question, “‘Did the Caribs really, as a matter of custom and practice, eat human flesh?’” Indeed he seems to have abandoned this question. He may have decided (reasonably) that the answer is irrelevant.

8. Gananath Obeyesekere makes this point about another region, maintaining that “the British discourse on cannibalism produced, in very complicated ways, the Maori practice of cannibalism” (Gananath Obeyesekere, “‘British Cannibals’: Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 [Summer 1992]: 653).

And he is surely right to insist that any historical investigation must take into account the discursive field it crosses; one can even argue that it is finally impossible to cross this field and arrive at a factual answer. But the absence of such an answer ought to be an answer in itself, taking up space as an unknown terrain in the historical landscape and thus helping to map it.

On the contrary, rejecting not only the content but the form of his evidential investigation, Hulme now contends that even acknowledging the absence of a factual answer is complicitous with the racist orthodoxy: "simply to answer 'non-proven' . . . is still to acquiesce to the implicit violence of colonialist discourse." Perhaps. But to answer effectively "proven false" is also to participate in that discourse. Acknowledging the fallacy of reversals, Hulme has performed one. Moreover, as his argument develops, not only do no alternatives to reversal appear, but the ground for them disappears beneath an expanding web of reversed claims that finally chokes the field of possibilities. This certainty is significantly more definitive than would have been the conclusion that since no reliable evidence for cannibalism can be found, it probably did not exist. The presence of cannibals in the region has not been more or less disproven or proven dubious; it has been deconstructed. It is no longer a possibility. In the essay from which I cited earlier, Ginzburg observes that "theoretical naiveté and theoretical sophistication share a common, rather simplistic assumption: they both take for granted the relationship between evidence and reality."<sup>9</sup> It seems as though Hulme's theoretical sophistication has combined with his political commitment to free his own historical narrative of the colonialist bias implicit in the cannibal mythology to mislead him to the conclusion that something for which he finds no solid evidence did not exist.

The question of whether cannibals existed in the pre-Columbian Caribbean is exceptionally resonant. Cannibalism, for all that Europeans have practiced it themselves, became in Western culture the ideal type of alien behavior. Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" exploits this typology prophetically. In the colonial situation, the cannibals are ineradicable markers of alterity. Thus their removal from the Caribbean scene in *Colonial Encounters*—again, not as presence but as possibility—erases a particularly sure sign that the Caribbean might constitute a genuinely alternative culture ("alternative" in the sense that while it surely had important elements in common with European culture, Caribbean culture was not directly intelligible or transparent to Europeans, and required, beyond translation, interpretation). By dismissing the possibility of cannibals, Hulme does not just erase this sign of alterity, he writes over it. The Caribs, while remaining mysterious for lack of documentary information, nonetheless lose the most dramatic part of their mystery

9. Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence," p. 83.

and with it, symbolically, part of their ability to define themselves as whatever they are.

Yet the recuperation of the self-definition—or more broadly, the agency—of the conquered has been the central principle of the post-colonial scholarship that precisely thereby enlists itself in decolonization. *Colonial Encounters* embraces this principle and, in the absence of contemporary New World texts,<sup>10</sup> exemplifies its unavoidably parochial workings through readings of the European discourse that seek nonetheless to restore the presence of the native inhabitants by exposing the process of their effacement. But this exposure, when it takes the form of promoting with the same certainty an alternative face, is in its turn also effacing. The old mask of “cannibal” gives way to a new one of “noncannibal” while the categories remain the same. The trick would be, as everyone in the field understands, to read in a way that uncovers the agency of the colonized even though the texts one is reading are virtually always and only the colonizers’ narratives. In the remainder of this discussion I will propose such a way of reading. In the absence of the evidence a counternarrative would provide, one can still open the historical scene to other possibilities a little more than we have done. The way to do this, speaking in terms of cannibals, is to focus on their “nonproven” status, and instead of reducing the field of the “nonproven” by preemptive glosses, possibly even to expand it.

## 2

The following describes a situation that is the complementary opposite to the one embodied in the Caribs. The Indians in this encounter are “good Indians,” not to be annihilated but incorporated. In terms of Hulme’s definition of the cannibal as the projection of those attempting to devour him or her, this is cannibalism, too, but in its benevolent mode. The whites proffer largess rather than force, and the Indians are gratefully sated. The peaceful entry of Indians into the European body politic needs no threatening myths to justify it. In this particular instance of benevolent cannibalism, the English, to expand their empire in Virginia, were seeking an alliance with the powerful Algonquian Chief Powhatan, who, as it happened, was in the early seventeenth century in the process of extending his own hegemony over most of the tribes in the region. The arriving colonists dubbed him the “Great Emperor” and the English, hoping to transform the Indian emperor into a New World vassal, offered him a crown. John Smith, who had his doubts about the whole strategy,

10. See the brief but penetrating discussion of this problem in Patricia Seed, “On Caribbean Shores: Problems of Writing History of the First Contact,” *Radical History Review* 53 (Spring 1992): 5–11.

reported the incident in *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) and drew this sketch of the actual coronation:

All being met at Werowocomoco [Powhatan's village], the next day was appointed for this Coronation, then the presents were brought him, his Bason and Ewer, Bed and furniture set up, his scarlet Cloke and apparell with much adoe put on him, being perswaded by [his son] Namontack they would not hurt him: but a foule trouble there was to make him kneele to receive his Crowne, he neither knowing the majesty nor meaning of a Crowne, nor bending of the knee, endured so many perswasions, examples, and instructions, as tyred them all; at last by leaning hard on his shoulders, he a little stooped, and three having the crowne in their hands put it on his head, when by the warning of a Pistoll the Boats were prepared with such a volley of shot, that the King started up in a horrible feare, till he saw all was well. Then remembring himselfe, to congratulate their kindnesse, he gave his old shoes and his mantell to Captaine Newport [the English leader]: but perceiving his purpose was to discover the Monacans [a nonallied tribe], he laboured to divert his resolution, refusing to lend him either men or guides more than Namontack; and so after some small complementall kindnesse on both sides, in requitall of his presents he presented Newport with a heape of wheat eares that might containe some 7 or 8 Bushels, and as much more we bought in the Towne, wherewith we returned to the Fort.<sup>11</sup>

This is a very complicated story with foreground, background, and even underground. In the foreground there is the astonishing spectacle of Powhatan suspiciously tolerating scarlet cloak, basin, ewer and bed, but, no matter what anyone says, absolutely drawing the line at kneeling to receive his crown, which requires three men to place it on his head. Made to bend but not bow, the new king reciprocates by making the English captain a gift not just of his mantle but of his old shoes.

In the background there is the Indians' growing recognition that the English visitors are invaders rather than visitors and the attempt led by Powhatan to present a united front, while for their part the English do everything they can to divide and conquer. Underground is Smith's untiring self-promotion, served in this instance by the manifest ineptitude of Christopher Newport who just does not understand Indians as well as Smith.

Underground and background present no real analytical problems. That is, the emergence of individual self-making as part of empire building has been frequently observed; and the treacheries of European-Indian relations are no surprise. On the contrary, we have very little to go on in dealing with the foreground of the coronation anecdote that is

11. John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*, 2 vols. (1624; Glasgow, 1907), 1:142-43.

curiously out of ideological focus. The ambitious spokesman of a brand-new imperial creed, Smith describes a scene in which not just Newport but the English as a whole and their coronation ritual appear ridiculous. To be sure, Powhatan also looks silly, but that makes sense to the English. The puzzle is why Smith punctiliously records a series of moves that make so solemn a white ceremony seem ludicrous? For if the English expostulations and maneuvers, not to mention the culminating clapping of the crown on that stubborn Indian head, have the aura of slapstick today, it must have been at least latent back then as well. Readers may bring much of its meaning to a text, but they do not bring it all. If, reading this passage, we laugh at the English, somewhere, to some degree, Smith knew they were laughable.

We do know something of the historical context of Smith's account that partly illuminates the situation.<sup>12</sup> Smith was not in charge of the coronation; the ceremony was overseen by his rival, Newport, with whose policies Smith was in scornful disagreement. The discomfiture of this rival was very likely pleasing to Smith, as was the evidence that other ways would have to be found to bend the overproud Indians to the English crown. This is certainly one explanation, but my point here is that it is not sufficiently powerful to account for the subversive force of the anecdote in which the Indians assume an authority that Smith elsewhere assiduously denies them. Except for the moment in which he is startled by the unexpected volley, Powhatan stands firmly and immovably at the center of the scene. In Smith's telling, Powhatan dominates the action throughout, has the last word and performs the last gestures that send the English back to their fort bested, at least in dramatic terms. When we recall that Smith is always a self-conscious writer—that he certainly considered language “the perfect instrument of empire,” being perhaps the first empire builder to adapt the bishop's proposition to individual use—the power the scene lends Powhatan is puzzling, for it is not Smith who stars in it, but Powhatan.

In the current critical idiom, one explanation for this lapse in authorial control would be that it represents a sort of textual rupture, a moment in the text when Smith responds sufficiently to the force of the other he is describing to permit us to hear the other's resisting voice. But essentially the same problem arises with this explanation as with the basic assumption that the texts of colonization are “perfect instruments” of empire. In both cases one assumes that these texts are, by nature, wholly

12. Karen Ordhal Kupperman, who also participated in the October 1992 Vanderbilt conference, suggested that the rivalry between Smith and Newport explained Smith's willingness to have the English look silly in relation to an Indian in that this made Newport look especially silly. (Rebecca Ann Bach has also made this suggestion.) While this seems eminently plausible, my point is never that plausible explanations cannot be found; only that none of them in itself constitutes a sufficient cause.

about control, and then calls those places where they are not, “anomalies.” The literature of colonization is about control, of course, but possibly not wholly; or perhaps control itself is a divided enterprise.

There is, anyway, little evidence in the Smith passage of loss of control; its voice is quite firm and characteristically impatient. The context of the coronation episode suggests moreover that Smith is fully in charge, confidently deploying his authorial skills and literary knowledge. The episode follows, in the *Generall Historie*, an elaborate description of an Indian ceremony that Smith recasts explicitly as an English masque, closing, for good measure, with two lines from Homer. The cause of Western civilization is advancing on all fronts and the fiasco with the crown seems clearly intended to measure Powhatan’s savagery. Yet, while the chief’s comic refusal does measure, for the English, the limits of the savage mind, it also delimits and bounds English concepts of civilization. Mark Twain would one day perfect the mechanism in the Smith passage whereby a detailed physical description of the garb or ceremony of social dignity calls its bluff or, as we say in America, deconstructs it.

This deconstruction is not a transhistorical effect of language as such. Smith’s exposure of English ceremonial constructions responds to a particular historical moment, offering an account whose narrative authority is limited precisely by Smith’s own historical involvement. The self-deconstructing tendency of the coronation passage reflects its historical indeterminacies. Smith is uncertain about his situation, meaning that he is neither sure what the story unfolding around him is, nor how to tell it, nor even how he wants it to come out. So he effectively tells several stories composed of overlapping but not identical events. I would suggest that such narrative moments in which several histories can be and are being written (told) are the very stuff of historical process, and further that in themselves, and especially at their intersections and in their conflicts, they produce materials for an alternative imperial history that escapes the trap of reversing the orthodoxy.

Here is another narrative moment that describes Powhatan’s reaction to certain English blandishments in terms that appear wholly irreconcilable with Smith’s. Smith quotes Powhatan as saying,

If your King have sent me Presents, I also am a King, and this is my land. . . . Your Father is to come to me, not I to him, nor yet to your Fort, neither will I bite at such a bait: as for the Monacans I can revenge my owne injuries, and as for Atquanachuk, where you say your brother was slaine, it is a contrary way from those parts you suppose it; but for any salt water beyond the mountaines, the Relations you have had from my people are false.<sup>13</sup>

13. Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles*, 1:141–42.

The fact that it is difficult to imagine what Smith could possibly reply to this eloquent, lucid statement represents the same paradox as in the earlier passage: Powhatan's understanding of European-Indian relations directly counters Smith's, while it is only through Smith's telling that we know anything of Powhatan's understanding. The obvious question is why Smith wants to communicate a powerful refutation of his own view to his English readers. I have already suggested one explanation: Smith tells us something he should not have out of uncertainty over how to organize his historical narrative. This uncertainty leads him to report as often as he interprets and sometimes to report events and aspects of the scene that are at odds with his own tentative interpretation. In one sense, of course, anything Smith reports is part of a narrative in that he sees everything inevitably in relation to a story of some kind. But this is a weak story unable to fully transform its materials to make them cohere with its argument. These materials remain, as it were, undigested or semidigested; they retain a quasi-independent and possibly rebellious life, as does the quotation of Powhatan's speech above.

We have become accustomed to invoking various fictional genres as analogues for historical narratives. But semidigested, discordant pieces of reporting, like Smith's description of the coronation and Powhatan's rebuttal, bear little resemblance to the story parts of imaginative fiction. Instead, they recall the components of another kind of story, the story of the scientific process. Smith's descriptions are effectively scientific observations, a comparison that is suggested also by the fact that the rise of the empire that Smith recounts was concurrent with the rise of empirical science.<sup>14</sup> Prompted by this comparison, I want to turn from the literary model to the scientific in search of a way to understand the peculiarities of Smith's history writing. (Charting the progress of science and of the empire presents similar intellectual problems also in that the rise of a global European empire has appeared for half a millennium as inevitable as the discovery of the double helix.) The narrative model I want to borrow has been sketched especially clearly by Bruno Latour, and although he ultimately derives from it a different argument, his terms seem to me autonomously applicable.<sup>15</sup> Many historians of science have labored to

14. Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (London, 1588–90) combines the two ascents. Harriot was a very important Renaissance scientist sent by Sir Walter Raleigh to the New World to report on its resources. His *True Report* seeks objectivity while also self-consciously serving the empire. The conjunctions and intersections, as well as the incoherences, of these two projects emerge here with great clarity. I plan to examine in a subsequent essay the genre of the "True Report" with relation precisely to the emergence of an empirical prose style along with modern imperialism.

15. See Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987). Three historians of science—Evelyn Fox Keller, Jessica Riskin, and Arnold Davidson—have objected that I cite Latour to make a case apparently the opposite of his. They have explained that Latour's denial that science is the progressive

demystify science in much the same way historians of American colonization have been attempting to demystify the discovery. The effort to write the history of science otherwise than as a series of epiphanies—to write a *history* of science, not its bible—has produced newly procedural accounts of the emergence of scientific knowledge. In Latour’s terminology, there are two ways to define science: “science in the making” and “ready-made science.” The first definition describes a process of finding or making scientific advances fraught with uncertainties, redundancies, and contingencies. Scientific progress is thus *underdetermined*: there is never enough evidence to make certain an explanation of observed phenomena. An explanation becomes certain only after it is made, at which point it appears “just enough determined” and seems forevermore the inevitable outcome of an entirely coherent and meaningful evolution.

This distinction between states of scientific knowledge before and after discoveries, and especially the notion that progress toward a discovery is underdetermined up to the moment the discovery occurs, seems to me highly pertinent to the problems of writing an alternative colonial history. “Science in the making” and “ready-made science” suggest analogous kinds of history, “history before the fact” and “history as the past.” Like science in the making, history before the fact is uncertain, apparently redundant, and contingent; only retrospectively does it take on direction and determination. The Smith passages can be seen to represent history before the fact, and it is governed not by excessive but by insufficient determining forces. (I should perhaps stipulate that by *fact* I mean an accepted account of things, and that while I would maintain that there is a world out there and that it contains objective conditions we do not create, I do not refer here to such objective conditions but to the hybrid we call a fact and which fuses the material and the ideal such that we are unable to extricate them.)

Registering Powhatan’s resistance, Smith writes with political intention but also in considerable doubt about his ability to carry out his intention—to make the Indians submit to the rule of the English crown and also to win for himself the rewards of such a victory. Uncertain and needing not only to persuade others but to understand for himself, he describes more of the elements of the situation than fit into his favored

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discovery of natural facts has in view a relativist refutation of the very existence of natural facts. My effort to exhume from the historical record the traces of multiple inconclusive moments would imply the contrary about history: that the facts exist and manifest themselves outside discursive explanations (such facts might constitute Ginzburg’s “evidence.”) I still persist in using Latour’s terms, however, in the belief that my misreading is actually an adaptation. Latour studies the making of science while I am concerned with the making of history. To strip scientific stories of their telos requires replacing natural facts with historical facts—the facts, for instance, of the construction of the “discovery” of DNA. Latour is therefore no more relativistic about history than I am.

interpretation, including some elements that will turn out, once the incident is closed, to have led toward its outcome, while others will in retrospect appear contrary to historical tendency or just insignificant, ephemeral.

In short, Smith's language is *not* the perfect instrument of empire. He tries to make it so, but he is never perfectly successful. On the other hand, if he were successful, if there were a perfect *instrument* of empire, would this not imply that there were also perfect *objects* of colonization? A great deal has been written about the mutuality of colonizer and colonized. But most of it is about either ideology or psychology, or at any rate about the content of the relationship. The form is equally at issue and in one respect still more radically defining. For it is in the formal definition of the dyad of conqueror and conquered that the third party to the analysis, the scholar, is also inevitably and organically engaged. And just as it is becoming evident that the authority of the colonizer to define the empire must be curtailed before a new account can be produced, so must the authority of the scholar. The impulse that drives *Colonial Encounters* to produce an *authoritative* counternarrative is both admirable and ultimately self-defeating.

This contradiction has two sites: one in the effective appropriation of the voice of the dispossessed in order to speak on their behalf, a second in an appropriation of the imperial discourse in order to condemn it. Decolonization must begin at home with the recognition that the desire to recuperate the contingency of the European hegemony is not disinterested. We find ourselves, in the millennial twilight of the empire, with the urgent task of establishing that Europe's global dominion was not in the nature of things; that whatever brought about five centuries of Western rule, it was not, as the founders of the United States claimed for their own empire, "Nature and Nature's God"; that civilization can exist under different auspices. If, contemplating a world without the European empire, we take seriously the repudiation of its universality—of its sufficiency for all truths and political realities—this should be reflected in the form as well as the content of our revisionary narratives. An omniscient counter-history in this regard is a contradiction in terms.

The current scholarship of colonization has focussed on the way the empire builders acquired control. But in the acquiring, in the process of acquisition, control is not yet at work. John Smith does not control the history in the making that he records; he records the history in order to control it. He is not wholly confident that Powhatan can be brought under the English aegis. Hernán Cortés, whose conquest of Mexico seems inevitable to Tzvetan Todorov in his *Conquest of America* (1982), was himself so far from thinking the conquest certain that before marching on Mexico City he burnt his ships to preclude retreat.

Smith's description of the coronation of Powhatan and his report of Powhatan's rebuke to the English king are chronicles of uncertainty that

bear witness to material uncertainties. These chronicles' lapses and incoherencies, their redundancies and paradoxes, represent the limits of discourse, the moments in which discourse does not know what to say. These are moments when alternatives coexist, when their futures are underdetermined and therefore genuinely undetermined. When at such moments many forces, intentions, and effects combine, interact, parallel, or counter one another, they do not yet add up to causality. They are all insufficient, singly or in any combination, to cause the reality that ultimately ensues. Historical evidence is thus doubly problematical not only because it is always read through an interpretive lens but because even before that it may not explain or it may explain only partially. This second problem is particularly intractable when the evidence is entirely narrative and likely to present entire plots. The uncertain play of historical evolution is more evident when different kinds of evidence have to be related to one another. But the suggestion I am making for the recognition of uncertainty is meant to apply to any historical method. The problem raised by reading evidence with relation to reality, in my view, is not just that we are uncertain about how to interpret the evidence but that it may not relate to the reality we seek to explain.

For what these underdetermined and therefore incoherent moments inscribe is not historical direction but human agency. And to read these moments it is not enough to recognize the colonizer's limited authority over history and the text; that recognition leads only to reading textual ruptures, which perversely confirms the wholeness of the *reader's* understanding. If an account of the past includes its indeterminacies, parts of the account are very likely to remain terminally "nonproven" and others incoherent. About the crowning of Powhatan we can say with certainty neither that the English crown appropriated Powhatan's authority nor that it failed. In fact, the major event in these scenes is not the outcome at all but the interaction.

As we look back to the seventeenth century, seeing interaction in the course of empire building makes it seem less destined and the empire builders less entitled—a welcome implication. We are pleased to see the authority of Cortés and Smith diminish as their narratives of the rise of the empire prove uncertain. On the other hand, stressing the uncertainties and incoherences of imperial chronicles may also have a less welcome implication for how we see ourselves in relation to the twentieth century. The underdetermination of the empire's rise is a ground for denying definitive authority to the narratives of Cortés and Smith. But underdetermination also limits the authority of current historians of the empire's fall. We too write chronicles of uncertainty, of which we are just the coauthors.