

Echoes



I'm not in the habit of reading my work once it appears in print. I figure: I wrote it, I finished it, and now, in a way, it's over. I'd never really considered the dynamics of being a reader of your own finished work—or rather, of posing as a reader of it—until this past November, when I did indeed read my book in anticipation of the roundtable discussion at the American Studies Association conference. As I was reading, I found myself taking notes, because that's what I do when I read. And as I was taking notes, I began to recognize, visually, in my own hand, short phrases that I remember writing years ago—in margins, on Post-its, in notebooks, on the backs of library call slips. Short strings that I hoped would throw a line out to something just out of reach. Or bursts of words that, once flung down, might just send something back from the big surrounding sound. They were the phrases that I jotted with a sense of discovery, underlined, circled a few times, and then filed away praying that they would somehow turn into more text. And here, years later, I found myself taking notes again in a hotel room in L.A., pulling these phrases out of the book that did finally emerge, and only belatedly, uncannily recognizing them as those very first strains as I was straining to hear.

On this reading, I kept thinking about closure.

I share this because these jottings on either side of the narrative made me think about how texts are assembled and disassembled, how inevitably and intimately we are involved in this messy practice of taking narratives apart and putting them together again, of dealing with pieces, consolidations, disarticulations, gleanings. I realized that practice was not simply inevitable, but that it actually became an important part of my method and my attempt in writing *Seasons of Misery*, especially in constructing the narratives I was writing—or what I perhaps awkwardly called the “narrative readings.” Trying to turn the textual evidence of early settlement into not only an analysis of, but also into a particular kind of narrative of early settlement, required this kind of piecing apart and piecing back together differently—not just repeating or translating the original narrative as a re-told thing; not just reading alongside the original narrative; not just summarizing, or streamlining, or stylizing—but really using an act of narration (my own) to hear more clearly what I kept on hearing: the enormous unsettlement at the heart of what we call colonial settlement.



Plimoth Plantation. Courtesy of Jack Costello.

On this reading, I kept thinking about closure. It's done, after all. What does it add up to? How do its accounts close out? The question is legitimate. Nevertheless, I kept being thrown back on the realization that resisting closure was always a main element—not just in the process of reading for and writing the book, but in its very argument. I needed, as much as I could, to stay inside catastrophe rather than to recuperate it, to stay inside chaos without the relief of overview, to stay inside seasons of suffering and violence rather than to chart a chronology that resolved them. To me, resisting closure was a key point, because I thought doing so could bring us closer to the profound discontinuities that characterized these first “settlements.” The developmental narrative—this led to that, led to that, and ended thus—enforces or at least attempts to fix a continuity of meaning, a heuristic “making” that does not keep being unmade. This taken-for-granted demand to arrive at historical continuity, coherence, trajectory was associated, in my mind, with

establishing a fixity of meaning that seemed to seriously mis-tell what settlement was, and how coloniality happened.

To resist closure, to dwell in discontinuity, required engaging different temporal frames—both within the texts that I was reading and within the text that I was writing. Most of all, it meant slowing way down. Recently, I heard Hayden White talk and he said at one point: “No one ever lived the historical past, only the experiential past.” By the historical past, he meant the knowledge that historians have mapped out for us. The experiential past was the unmapped. As a writer and scholar, I wanted to stay in and move slowly within that unfixed, unresolved past: that sense of a present, ongoing past which, because it was catastrophic, had lost its bearings in understanding its own relation to both past and future. Because I am a literary critic, I am of course aware of the fact that the texts I use as evidence are made things. They are *not* the experiential past, but more exactly attempts to map that past. Therefore, it was the unsettlement in the textual objects that drew me, or else the purported meaning that tried mightily to discipline that everywhere-unsettlement. Given that neither experience nor representation were transparent, it was left to me try to create a world in my own text that did not close easily, that did not level out, that did not, in Joseph Roach’s words, “invest the future with the fatality of the past.” I remember posting a big sign on my wall that said in capital letters: STAY WITH THE ACUTE. That was my effort.



Detail from an illustrated map in Richard Ligon, *A true and exact history of the island of Barbadoes: Illustrated with a map of the island, as also the principall trees and plants there, set forth in their due proportions and shapes, drawne out by their severall respective scales* (London, 1657). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In piecing texts apart and putting them back together, in catching strains and straining to catch, I was trying both to pay a much slower attention to things that we take for granted, and to extract and compose other stories that the texts were holding but not telling. To me, this set of terms—non-closure, slowness, discontinuity, staying with the acute—had everything to do with the

misery and violence, with the catastrophe of colonial settlement. The last section of the Jamestown chapter is called "The Echoing Air." Reading the book again, that was one of those old phrases that stayed with me anew. As Paspahegh warriors surrounded the Jamestown block house, they shouted their own name in triumph. George Percy writes: "The echo thereof made both the air and woods to ring."

It was the echo I heard: the thing that both hangs and reverberates; that amplifies and extends; that repeats and reflects; that warbles, distorts; but that ultimately both remembers and haunts the sound that was made. Now I'm interested in thinking about this conversation, too, as a kind of an echo. I'm enormously grateful for the chance to hear this through other people's ears, and to think of the book as not over, not closed, but rather open and perhaps even unresolved in a potentially generative way.

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