

Resituating Anglo-American Colonial Textuality

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Matt Cohen. *The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. x + 237 pp. \$67.50 (cloth); \$22.50 (paper).

Jonathan Beecher Field. *Errands into the Metropolis: New England Dissidents in Revolutionary London*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2009. xv + 154 pp. \$85.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (paper).

Martha L. Finch. *Dissenting Bodies: Corporealities in Early New England*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xvi + 274. \$45.00.

Francis Bacon's understanding of rhetoric as merely a mechanism for disputation seems downright tepid compared to Plato's contention that rhetoric is an art form designed to rule minds. Bacon's sympathy for newly emergent scientific methods doubtless influenced his more scaled-down response to the power of rhetoric as a discipline. Even so, he hardly shied away from venturing into the choppy waters of rhetorical contention.

As his hortatory short essay "Of Plantations" indicates, Bacon supported the expansion of England's imperial power across the Atlantic. Before he died in 1626, he was personally involved in schemes for New World ventures. But, as Sarah Irving has explained "In a Pure Soil": Colonial Anxieties in the Work of Francis Bacon" (*History of European Ideas* 32 [2006]: 249-62), this natural philosopher held reservations about the possible deleterious effects of English imperialism. He worried that imperialist efforts could adversely affect both the furthering of truth in general and the lives of indigenous peoples in particular.

"Of Plantations" also expressed Bacon's concern over the personal character of the men sent to colonize the New World, an issue that John Smith would personally exploit in self-serving accounts of his transatlantic adventures. Bacon thought it sheer folly to expect English civilization to spread to distant regions when the emissaries of the empire were men of low moral caliber. Given his emphasis on

individual character in colonial endeavors, it is easy to imagine that had Bacon lived longer he might have taken considerable interest in the early rhetorical/textual sparring matches occasioned by various settlers' internecine squabbles. Possibly Bacon would have prized how certain colonial dissidents cleverly took advantage of the more open-ended possibilities of rhetorical disputation, as he understood it, to engage and prevail over the ruling establishment's presumably more authoritative rhetoric, as Plato understood it.

Recent discussions of early Anglo-American colonial culture have instructively featured dissidents as underdogs voicing legitimate grievances and also in possession of an impressive rhetorical acumen for airing those grievances. Usefully adding to this discussion, Jonathan Beecher Field's *Errands into the Metropolis* reveals various ways print media enabled the strategic rhetorical maneuvers of several disempowered political and religious figures in Rhode Island. How, Field asks, did such disfranchised individuals prevail argumentatively over entrenched and apparently more potent and influential writers speaking on behalf of established colonial governments? His answer is, in effect, that the best defense is a strong offense. In the cases considered in *Errands into the Metropolis*, dissidents facilitated their strong offense by framing their narratives in literary forms familiar to and valued by the homeland ruling elite.

As a result, the textual enterprises of these dissidents amounted less to a collective account of an errand into the wilderness (as Perry Miller titled one of his famous books in 1956) than of an errand into the metropolis. These works, in short, were designed as sturdy transatlantic vessels specifically fashioned to attract the regard of cosmopolitan Londoners. In books and in person, dissident authors proclaimed their English identity, especially in relation to sophisticated homeland attitudes prevalent among Parliamentary leaders. These authors understood that, in London at least, toleration was valued more as a pragmatic means to an imperialist end than as a high philosophical principle. Accessing this metropolitan sense of empire-facilitating pragmatism, dissidents represented the colonial governments as lagging behind the times and, even worse, as engaged in disfranchising English subjects, including (of course) the complaining authors. Often such charges of outrageous citizen abuse

included misunderstood and mistreated Native Americans, depicted as beleaguered English subjects.

In a particularly strong chapter, Field considers the influence of the pansophist linguistic manuals of 1630s and 1640s. These manuals, particularly *Janua Trilinguarum Reserata* by Czech philosopher Jan Amos Comenius, anticipated and likely tutored the dialogic structure and linguistic emphasis showcased in Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* (1643). Within a Comenian framework, Field contends, Williams spoke for the Narragansett people as English citizens engaging in ordinary civil transactions. This portrait amounted to a strategy linking Williams' personal political and religious aims to Parliament's duty to supervise local governments in colonial America.

Samuel Gorton followed a similar course in *Simplicities Defence against Seven-Headed Policy* (1646), a cleverly constructed annotated anthology of evidentiary documents related to his personal complaints. Gorton's eccentric quasi-mystical religious beliefs probably mattered little in a cosmopolitan London rife with sects during the 1640s. What apparently did matter, Field reasonably suggests, was Gorton's rhetorical recasting of a backwater colonial religious argument into a substantial metropolitan political issue. Throughout his book Gorton emphasized his homeland identity, specifically the denial of his rights as an English colonial subject. And also similar to Williams, Gorton insisted on the need for Parliament to maintain a proper governmental oversight, especially across the Atlantic.

John Clarke likewise transmuted religious persecution into political capital in *IllNewes from New-England* (1652), a book that would serve as a model for later persecution narratives penned by Quakers. The title itself, Field observes, rewards close attention. As the book's argument eventually reveals, the title intimates that New England has fallen behind the times in contrast to the progressiveness of Old England. Clarke revised the official Puritan accounts of the Antinomians and other Rhode Island dissidents by elaborating on a genre of martyrdom chronicles derived from John Foxe's often-reprinted *Acts and Monuments* (1563). Clarke deftly associated his own plight with a broader portrait of religiously persecuted English citizens throughout history as well as across the Atlantic.

In *The Networked Wilderness* Matt Cohen shares Field's focus on the variety of rhetorical means used by dissident authors who strategically represented New England Puritan authority as both outmoded and an impediment to empire building. The colonial Puritan establishment, these authors protested, also violated the dignity and rights of English subjects, including Native Americans. Thomas Morton, for example, portrayed the Pilgrims as insufficiently cosmopolitan, too non-progressive to serve as salient agents of modern seventeenth-century English commerce.

Field and Cohen, however, disagree about the vectoring of the rhetorical devices employed by dissident authors. Field makes a good case for rereading several dissident narratives as recastings of literary forms familiar to the governing homeland elite during the early seventeenth century. But Cohen makes an even more innovative and fascinating—possibly a game changing—case for rereading such narratives, published before the installment of a printing press in Cambridge in 1638, as antagonistic to generic expectations. “The particular tactics and genres chosen for synthesis (or to produce dissonance) are significant in the analysis of any given work,” Cohen observes, “but we must be wary of allowing generic precedents to determine our readings” (117-18). Instead, Cohen maintains, “generic destabilization is a key tactic for writers of settlement texts, for whom establishing one's authority meant exhibiting a command of both difference and similarity” (118).

So, for instance, in Morton's *The New English Canaan* (1637) the Pilgrims' alleged deficit in cosmopolitanism was specifically pegged to their lack of linguistic sophistication. Local Plymouth officials desired to control all communication systems vital to English colonization, Morton complained, but they were not up to the task because they were blindsided by Old World paradigms. Morton represented the Pilgrims as inept agents incapable of crossing cultural and linguistic divides. The Plymouth colonists failed, in Morton's account, because they were not open to new, more expansive communication systems now made necessary by New World experiences, especially the complicating presence of Native Americans.

Morton, to be sure, dramatized himself as the perfect agent for the English transatlantic imperial enterprise. The maypole at Merry-

Mount instanced an advertisement for Morton's sophisticated capacity for transnational communication. His maypole, Cohen intriguingly argues, was a publishing venue with buckhorns and verse posted on it that impugned and challenged Plymouth colony's authority over colonial communication systems. The buckhorns indicated shared communication between Morton and Native Americans, while poems of ludic riddling expressed a form of insider discourse understood by Morton's associates and possibly some Native Americans. What these pole "publications" meant was apparently indecipherable to Plymouth officials. Such obscurity, including calculated allusions to the Classics and *Don Quixote*, not only countered Congregationalist biblical reading practices but also implied the Pilgrims' deficiency in cosmopolitan discourse.

The implicit insult, Cohen contends in a risk-taking move, went still deeper to include even the Dutch-dissenter influenced typographical features (genre gestures, images and marginalia) of *The New English Canaan*. Like the maypole, the very textual elements of Morton's book shouted international standards as if to highlight the author's verbal attack on the retrograde provincialism of the Plymouth officials.

As indicated by his consideration of Morton's use of buckhorns, Cohen's approach to early colonial communication systems, or social networks of signification, is very broad and not easily synopsized here. For him, conversation-like means of exchange (basically anxious contests for social and economic control) can include animal traps, footpaths, wampum (embellished shells), dances, animal imitations, ceremonial posts, medical rituals, sign language, cooked food, among other means for signifying intentions expressed "within a continuous informational topography" (28). Cohen "reads" such signs as texts that once were as rich and communicatively nuanced as were circulated missives and printed books.

Although Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* raised questions about the sort of cultural coherence imagined in Morton's *The New English Canaan*, it nonetheless similarly validated a communication system freed from the limits of authorized Puritan interpretive paradigms. In fact, Cohen observes, Williams was deeply skeptical about the capacity of language to declare ultimate truth. Williams was also keenly aware of the Native American capacity to exploit semiotic

habits, and he valued a spontaneous ambient receptivity to intercommunication akin to his own position on a supra-rational spiritual openness to divine communication. Notice, too, Cohen advises, that even the perforated vertical line drawn between English and Indian words in *A Key* suggested (whether by design or accident) permeable boundaries open to crossing.

Permeable boundaries emerged as well in Edward Winslow's *Good News from New England* (1624). Winslow employed metaphors of consumption, blockage, elimination and flow to insinuate "a sense of speedy, dangerous flux in American Indian communication and slow, frustrating constipation in transatlantic messaging" (78). Combining female domestic knowledge and male frontier agency, Winslow doctored more than a Wampanoag sachem's bout of food poisoning during "a difficult time for digestion in New England" (74). He medicated the communication-divide between Native Americans and English colonists. In his book Winslow (similar to Morton) dramatized himself as an accomplished multi-lingual translator medically negotiating between Native American freedom and staid English custom. He did so, Cohen concludes, in ways intended to amend what he believed were misleading accounts of the resource-laden new land and also to celebrate a healthy reciprocal exchange of food and texts between colony and homeland.

As a principal commodity of social exchange, Martha L. Finch explains in *Dissenting Bodies*, colonial foodstuffs can be studied like narratives replete with nuanced evidence of settlers' experiences in the New World. Finch treats foodways as the most important element in a cultural network of ideas defined by the Plymouth founders' religious attitudes toward the human body. Besides their response to food, this network included concepts pertaining to illness, health, speech, gesture and dress. These cultural ingredients "can be read like texts" (23), all underwritten by a pervasive belief in the interpenetration of the spiritual and material realms.

On eight or so occasions in her book Finch takes vague and clichéd jabs at the frayed straw figures of Max Weber and Perry Miller to reaffirm the by now well-known fact that early Plymouth colonists did not perceive a wide separation between the body and the soul. Although the Pilgrims believed that "one's body ... revealed the state

of one's inner soul" (134), they were nonetheless ambivalent about the body. More specifically, Finch reminds us, these colonists believed that animal passions associated with the body always threatened reason and will. "When the rational mind and godly heart were abandoned and the animal passions and appetites ruled, humans took on the physical characteristics and moral qualities of beasts" (49).

Whatever precisely might constitute the "moral qualities of beasts" Finch does not say, but instead delves into pastor John Robinson's qualms over Myles Standish's massacre of some Native Americans. To protect a ragtag neighboring settlement, Captain Standish lured these victims to a conference, slaughtered them in a locked room and then displayed the head of one of them for six months outside a meetinghouse. Finch interprets this last event as a posted "text": "For Plymouth's saints, Indians' severed heads—safely dead yet animated with vital meanings—functioned as visible icons of God's goodness and sovereign authority" (59-60).

It follows that if the Plymouth founders were ambivalent about what their own bodies signified spiritually, they were even more concerned—for safety's sake, at the very least—with interpreting "textual" clues pertaining to Native American bodies. They tried to "read" these bodies, decode their corporeal signs. So, in two telling occasions, they thought they could discern a difference between Massasoit's looks and manners, and Wituwamat's speech and gestures. Precisely how these perfectly normal efforts at corporeal interpretation distinctly differed from what people generally did then, and still do now, whenever socially encountering others is left unaddressed as Finch moves on to an episode involving Edward Winslow and Stephen Hopkins. Both were invited to sleep in Massasoit's bed with his wife and others, but keenly "aware of their discomfited bodies" (200), the shocked visitors soon departed.

Unsurprisingly, discomfort with Native American bodies coalesced with discomfort with wild nature. This "howling wilderness" motif is certainly old hat, but Finch renders a full dress rehearsal of colonists' fears of contamination by the baleful New World environment: "It was especially during the first years of colonization that Plymouth's saints felt the wilderness's potential to consume them utterly, body and soul" (70). The wilderness, it seems, enacted a double agency as a

foodway. The Pilgrims' characteristic response was hard work aimed at transforming such a sinister landscape into an English garden. Then, instead of being "consumed" by nature, the settlers would benefit from "increased physical health and material gain as they ingested New England air, foodstuffs, land, and resources" (70).

As this wonky image of "ingested ... land" suggests, it is hard to avoid the impression that *Dissenting Bodies* brings little more to the table than (in Finch's overwrought phrasing) "corporeal metaphor[s] of eating" (97)—metaphors either simply or maladroitly applied to our already well-established and most basic understandings of early English colonial culture. Such an indulgent metaphoric feast can strain rational digestion, as when Finch promises to examine the "*fluid accretion* of the metaphorical and the literal in early New England" (27; emphasis added). Here is a more typical example: "Resisting such overt grasping for material wealth and status, [William] Bradford consumed New England's abundance through biblical metaphors and spiritual meanings" (97).

Such indulgence, the very antithesis of the moderation Puritans revered, returns me to Francis Bacon's "Of Plantations." Bacon advised rational temperance in colonial endeavors, especially in exchanges with indigenous peoples. His ideal goal was incremental improvement—intellectual and material advancement for Native Americans, English colonists and the homeland. Unfortunately, history would thoroughly sully that New Atlantis ideal.

But at least Bacon was on the mark in believing that printing radically changed the world. It is easy to imagine his ghost nodding its approval of the scope of Field's and Cohen's investigative curiosity about cause and form assessed in relation to agreement, difference and variation. And would not his phantom be pleasantly surprised by how Field's and Cohen's wide-ranging explorations of dissident textuality exploit the permeable boundaries of even Bacon's own understanding of rhetoric as only a mechanism for disputation?