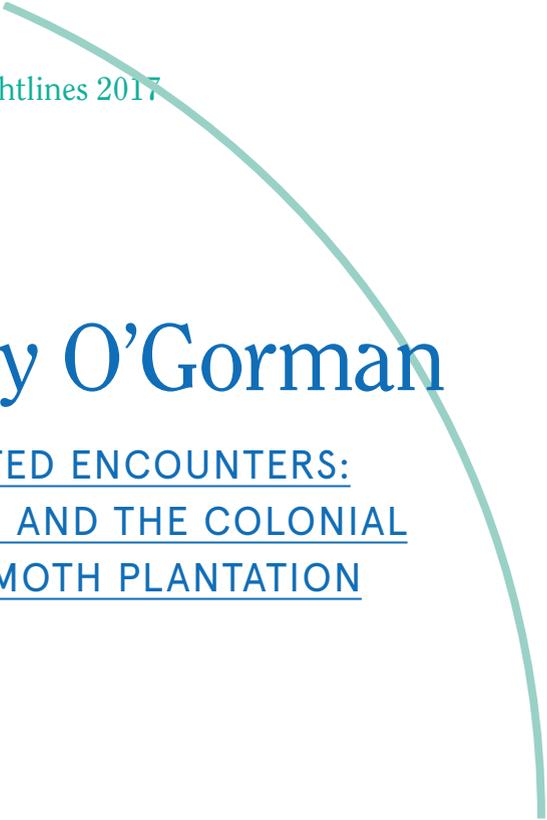


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Becca Roy O’Gorman

CONSTRUCTED ENCOUNTERS:
PERFORMANCE AND THE COLONIAL
GAZE AT PLIMOTH PLANTATION

Becca Roy O’Gorman

In 1947, Plimoth Plantation was established as a nonprofit corporation by Henry Hornblower II, a Boston-based stockbroker (and eventual vice president of Shearson Lehman/American Express). Hornblower attended Milton Academy, Andover Academy, and Harvard University, but spent the summers of his childhood in Plymouth, consumed with daydreams about Plymouth Colony, the Pilgrims, and the Wampanoags.¹ Hornblower conducted archeological excavations and research in the area, and funded numerous other digs in the area. Plimoth Plantation’s website tells us that Hornblower’s goal was to tell the “remarkable” story of “the small and fragile colony in Southeast New England” and the “Pilgrim’s struggle for survival to the people of America.”²

I am interested in the ways in which Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth, Massachusetts, functions as an instructional site for understanding and experiencing first contact between the European American “Pilgrims” and the American Indians. Performance, role-playing, and visitor interaction are implemented within the space to direct visitors in their experience and understanding of a prescribed narrative. The bodies of the performers, interpreters, and the visitors are employed in this encounter in order to reenact specific moments in colonial American history. James Luna’s performance *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (1991) mobilizes the idea of performing a stereotype and suggests the fallacy of the authentic Native.

Plymouth Colony was settled by a community often referred to as “the Pilgrims.” The colony was founded in 1620, when passengers on the *Mayflower* disembarked after a sixty-six-day voyage from England. The *Mayflower* carried 102 passengers, including about thirty crewmembers called “strangers,” who were not members of the religious sect.³ The pilgrims were considered Separatists, an isolationist wing of Puritanism—English Protestants critical of the Roman Catholic influence on the Church of England. On the frequently asked questions page, the plantation’s website responds to the question, “Who will I meet at the Wampanoag Homesite?”

All of the staff in the Homesite are Native People—either Wampanoag or from other Native Nations. Asking staff what Native nation they are from is a great way to begin a conversation...While their

1. Wampanoag, which translates to “people of the first light” or “people of the dawn,” are the native people who originally inhabited southern New England. Currently there are two federally recognized Wampanoag tribes: Mashpee and Gayhead; and four state recognized tribes in Massachusetts.

2. “Our Founder,” accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.plimoth.org/about/who-we-are/our-founder>.

3. “Our Founder,” accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.plimoth.org/about/who-we-are/our-founder>.

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clothing and houses are traditional, the Native interpreters you meet are not role players. They speak from a modern perspective about Wampanoag history and culture. This enables the staff to talk with you about historical as well as contemporary issues, events, and information about the Wampanoag.⁴

The clothing worn by the interpreters is often made of buckskin and decorated with beadwork, quillwork, or fringe (figs. 1, 3). Obviously, the Native interpreters are not reenacting 1627, because as “they speak from a modern perspective about Wampanoag history and culture,” they speak English rather than Wôpanâak, an Algonquin language.⁵ However, as these Native interpreters speak English, their clothing allows us to aestheticize the Native body and perpetuates the fantasy of the authentic Native. The rupture between the “traditional” Native dress and the contemporary narrative allows for a fantasy about a pastoral past to remain visible. The implementation of the third-person voice in the Wampanoag Homesite allows the interpreters to discuss an array of topics with visitors, from the War of 1675, the early and relatively peaceful colonial period, and other colonial settlements, to genocide, tribal hunting rights, contemporary stereotypes, and current events. The staged nature of the Native interpreters’ “costumes” and activities suggests that role-playing is occurring at the homesite, but in a slighter, subtler manner than in the English Village.

In the adjacent English Village, interpreters are dressed in reproductions of period clothing, speak in the dialect of the characters’ home regions, and inhabit the roles of the actual, documented inhabitants of the original colony. Each season, the Pilgrim Village at Plimoth Plantation stages the year 1627 for visitors. The settlement, buildings, meetinghouse, and gardens have been re-created based on archeological evidence, while Hobbamock’s Homesite is more generalized, placed in proximity to the English village for contrast and convenience. Interpreters address visitors in a first-person-present voice. These pilgrim actors perform tasks and dress in outfits that have been researched and fabricated according to seventeenth-century standards. The interpreters who occupy this site speak from a heavily researched lexicon that has been edited for any references to events that occurred after the mid-1600s.

4. “Homesite FAQs: What to Expect, How to Prepare,” accessed October 24, 2016; <https://www.plimoth.org/what-see-do/wampanoag-homesite/home-site-faqs#Who%20will%20I%20meet>.

5. After more than 150 years with no fluent speakers, the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project has established Wôpanâak as the first Native American community to reclaim a language with no living speakers. <http://www.wlrp.org/project-history/html>.

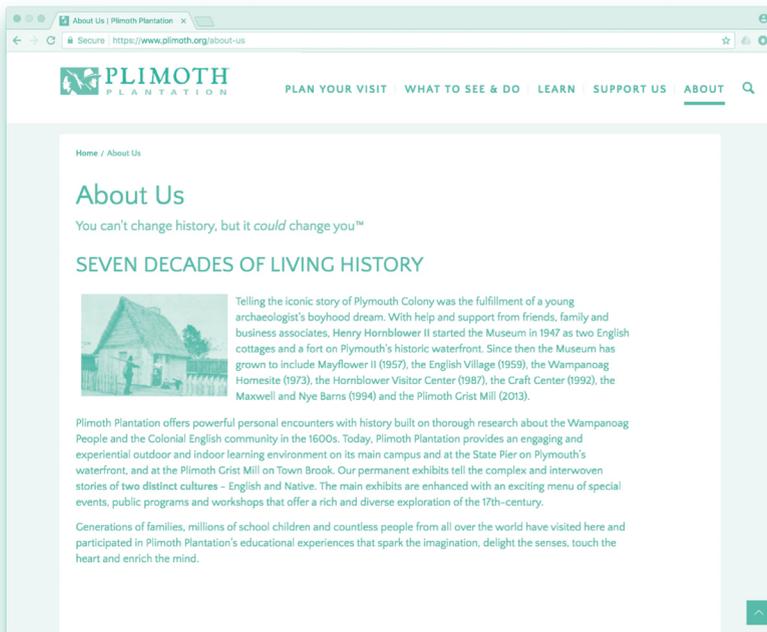
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Figure 1: Two interpreters in the Wampanoag Homestead. Photograph taken at Plimoth Plantation, August 26, 2012.



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Figure 2: Screenshot of Plimoth Plantation website, which features the trademarked slogan, "You can't change history, but it could change you," accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.plimoth.org/about-us>.



As Jacques Derrida explains:

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.⁶

The archive is therefore not simply the guardian or repository of history, but its legislating and enabling force. However, how events, objects, and ideas are included in an archive dictates how they can be interpreted and remembered. This is illustrated in the close historical character analyses that occur at the English Village compared to the more broad interpretations that happen at Hobbamock’s Homesite.

Before a visitor makes the trip to Plymouth, she is likely to visit Plimoth Plantation’s website, a virtual archive of the physical and embodied space of the plantation. In a consideration of Plimoth Plantation’s website, the marketing and branding strategies expose fissures in the institution’s educational objectives and performance mandates.

The trademarked slogan of the museum—“You can’t change history, but it *could* change you”—is printed on promotional material and on its website (fig. 2).⁷ This claim is powerful for its two distinct suggestions. First, let’s examine the assumption that history is unchangeable. This works to position that history and the museum itself as fixed and predetermined. This fixity, and Plimoth Plantation’s depiction of it, cannot be changed by visitor interactions, understanding, or interpretations. The second part of the sentence, conversely, presents a possibility for change and growth in the viewer. Encountering this history via its interpreters can be a powerful personal experience. Plimoth Plantation can perhaps create new connections for viewers, or alter their understanding of the history of the U.S., Massachusetts, or personal genealogy. The italicized “could” emphasizes the contingent nature of this transformation: It is not a guarantee. While Plimoth Plantation’s English Village attempts to revitalize an almost sacrosanct understanding of history based on the archival documents of the seemingly infallible forefathers, and Hobbamock’s Homesite attempts to approximate the environment and activities of a traditional Wampanoag summer

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

⁷ “About Us: Seven Decades of Living History,” accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.plimoth.org/about-us>. Emphasis in original.

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camp, each individual interaction between an actor or interpreter and a visitor has the potential to create an experience that is more accessible, effective, and individual than the archive alone has the potential to create. This would seem to be the underlying principle of living history museums: to create a space for individual interpretations, imaginings, and experiences of the past.⁸ Plimoth Plantation's motto disregards the idea that one's personal and embodied experience has the potential to alter one's understanding of history.

A photograph of a reenactment found on the website illustrates Plimoth Plantation's problematic relationship with its own performance mandates (fig. 3). A golden-brown turkey sits on a platter in the center of the image, on a table set with silver goblets and an earthenware pitcher. Three figures are seated at the table. The bearded man on the right is dressed as a traditional pilgrim: wide-brimmed felt hat, ruffled collar, and black doublet coat. The woman on the left and the man in the center are dressed in what appears to be traditional Native dress. The woman holds up a silver spoon, and the two seem to be looking at their reflections in the convex surface of the shiny metal. The Pilgrim man is looking at them looking at themselves.

Here the mirror functions as a heterotopic and utopian space and a microcosm of the institution. The interpreter sees her image projected into the simultaneously unreal and real space of the spoon. Michel Foucault writes, "From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I am over there."⁹ Similarly, the contemporary Native body in the museum is a mirror image and a constructed projection in a fabricated environment, which reflects an implied historical absence. Foucault considers museums to be heterotopias because they are simultaneously mythic and real. This is doubly apt for Plimoth Plantation as its foundational narrative is based on a story of American exceptionalism and so-called "rugged individualism" that sidesteps large swathes of history that allow viewers to ignore histories of violence and oppression. Plimoth Plantation functions as a contradictory site, representing both the actual colony of Plimoth, and a microcosm of the American ideals and histories it attends to. In this image, and in the Wampanoag Homesite and the English Village, the viewer experiences a break in traditional time. This image asks

8. Scott Magelssen and Rhona Justice-Mallory, eds., *Erecting History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 6-7.

9. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture, Movement, Continuity* 5 (1984): 46-49.



Figure 3: Image from Plimoth Plantation website, accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.plimoth.org/about-us>. Attribution unavailable.



Figure 4: James Luna, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, 1991. Performance and installation, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Shadon Collins. http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/research/2005-06/cohen/cohen_juna.html.

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us to imagine a moment in the past when this moment might have happened. Plimoth Plantation asks visitors to imagine a time when Wampanoags cooked all of their meals over an outdoor fire and to imagine they are traveling to a time where all clothing is made by hand. This temporal turning is indicative of both ephemeral and eternal spaces. At once the visitor sees the enduring legacy of American colonialism, and the absence of the contemporary Native body.

This image and the reenactment it depicts manifest an assumption about the Wampanoags as naive, uncivilized, and uneducated. They are mesmerized by what is considered a common utensil of dining etiquette. This attraction to shiny objects later led to massive swindling by traders who took advantage of the Native Americans' unfamiliarity with certain objects and traded them inexpensive trinkets such as bells, beads, and metals for large quantities of expensive beaver pelts, hides, and land.¹⁰ This image functions in opposition to Plimoth Plantation's mandate that the Native interpreters do not perform themselves. Therefore, even if the premise is historically accurate that the inaugural Thanksgiving feast occurred in the early seventeenth century, even if a Wampanoag was surprised by her reflection in a spoon, this reenactment opposes the museum's message. These Native interpreters at Plimoth Plantation are performing a caricature from the past, rather than depicting a contemporary Native message.

James Luna's performance and installation work *Take a Picture With a Real Indian* was first staged in 1991 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and was later reperformed on Columbus Day in 2011 in Union Square in Washington, DC, in front of a statue of Christopher Columbus. Luna challenges and disrupts the assumption of authenticity that museums strive to maintain by inviting visitors to have their picture taken with a "real" Native person. In the performance, Luna appears in three different outfits and invites visitors to take their picture with him in each: khakis and a T-shirt, a leather breechcloth, or a feather headdress and beaded breastplate. During the installation, visitors could choose to be photographed with life-size cutouts of Luna dressed in the same three outfits. Visitors were instructed to take two pictures: one to take with them, and one to leave for display. Luna instructed, "Take two. Leave one, and take one home." In this act of reciprocity, which is

10. Suzan Shown Harjo, ed., *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (Washington DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2014).

11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 270-304.

typically an exchange a tourist would pay for, each person benefits from the relationship. The visitor and Luna each get a photograph as a souvenir and visual verification of an “authentic” encounter. However, in order for Luna to engage with the visitors and receive the photograph, thus completing his photo documentation of the performance, he willingly subjects himself to stereotyping. In Luna’s self-conscious vulnerability, he exposes the unconscious assumptions of the viewer. Luna engages in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed “strategic essentialism,” a process of temporarily accepting an essentialist position in order to interrogate essentialist terms and dismantle thought or achieve a strategic goal.¹¹

Underlying *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* is the idea of the Native body as entertainment and tourist attraction.¹² Historically, museums have often become repositories for artifacts created by Native people and actual tombs for Native bodies, as funerary objects and bones were highly coveted in early anthropological collections of Native objects. Similarly, museums also became places where these Native bodies functioned as entertainment.

Jane Blocker describes the opposition between the ethnographic impulse to classify and collect objects, and performance-based practices, which elude the archive.¹³ She uses a metaphor of bone and flesh: the bones are the archival materials and the flesh is the performative, embodied action. Although literal bones and funerary objects were coveted by nineteenth-century archaeologists and ethnographers, the bones Blocker refers to are the physical artifacts that make up archives. The ethnographer, anthropologist, or museum situates itself around objects and collections and within the logic of the archive. In this type of collecting and archiving, which often privileges objects over the accounts, words, and memories of living Native people whose objects are being collected, the assumption that objects can tell truths about the past is a guiding principle. According to Blocker, performance is contingent on the bodily presence of both the performer and the audience, and therefore is ephemeral and resists the archive. This experience is what Blocker deems “flesh,” which opposes materiality. Blocker writes:

Key to the hegemonic European episteme is the supreme value given to alphabetic systems and thus to denotation (wherein one

12. For more discussion of the exhibition of living native bodies see Deborah Willis, ed., *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”* (Temple University Press, 2010). Pamela Newkirk, *Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga* (New York: Amistad, 2015); Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*

(New Press, 1995); and Theodora Kroeber, *Shin in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

13. Jane Blocker, “Ambivalent Entertainments: Jane Luna, Performance, and the Archive,” *Grey Room* no. 37 (Fall 2009): 52–77.

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thing, one sign, reliably and perpetually stands for another) and the rejection of embodied forms of knowledge.¹⁴

Because of this opposition between the “hegemonic epistemology” of the archive, which emphasizes accuracy, science, and truth, and forms of knowledge that privilege performance and the possibility for transformation, these embodied forms of knowledge go unrecognized.

Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider also explores this metaphor of flesh and bone. “In the archive, flesh is to be that which slips away. Flesh can house no memory of bone. Only bone speaks memory of flesh.”¹⁵ Therefore, the archive is unable to codify experience. Using this metaphor, the performance cannot be indexical because it is ephemeral; only physical objects can be indexical. The archive, collection, and museum are founded in materiality, in a constellation of physical objects that create and support a narrative. Experience, performance, and embodied knowledge consequently become superfluous to the object; they don’t fit, or they overflow the containers of the archive. Similarly, Peggy Phelan claims that performance is given to disappearance, that it resists the archive. Phelan proposes that performance and the body create ways of understanding or knowing that might radically counter archival or museological ways of knowing.¹⁶

The visitor’s experience at Plimoth Plantation is predicated on an interaction with the actors and interpreters—their experience is made complete by engaging with the actors and interpreters. Performance transpires in both the English Village and Hobbamock’s Homesite in various degrees of intentionality. However, despite the possibility for radical interpretations and readings of history, Plimoth Plantation’s motto, “You can’t change history,” rejects this possibility and these basic tenets of performance, by stating the impossibility that the individual could impact or experience change. If the past is performed, or made visible as re-enactment, it might function as this type of bodily transmission of knowledge, a counter-memory, or a striated space for disagreement. A sensory access point to this type of knowledge provides a different experience and an opportunity to perform and thus change memory and history. However, this rhizomatic type of knowledge that may result from improvisational and creative performance challenges

14. Jane Blocker, “Ambivalent Entertainment: James Luna, Performance, and the Archive,” *Grey Room* 37 (Fall 2009): 52–77.

15. Rebecca Schneider, “Archives Performance Remains,” *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 5.

16. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146–166. Also Schneider.

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Plimoth Plantation’s authority. While performance-based learning is embraced throughout the museum in a didactic sense, its radical potential is stifled by the possibility of rupturing the narrative that supports Plimoth Plantation’s foundation.