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Review Essay: "America's Hometown" Revisited

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REVIEW ESSAYS

“America’s Hometown” Revisited

One Small Candle: The Plymouth Puritans and the Beginning of English New England

FRANCIS J. BREMER

Oxford University Press, 2020

258 pp.

The World of Plymouth Plantation

CARLA GARDINA PESTANA

Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020

232 pp.

This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving

DAVID J. SILVERMAN

Bloomsbury, 2019

514 pp.

They Knew They Were Pilgrims: Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty

JOHN G. TURNER

Yale University Press, 2020

448 pp.

For the town of Plymouth, Massachusetts, 2020 was to have been a big year. A whole series of coordinated months-long festivities were planned, including commemorations, conferences, parades, fireworks, and, for sure, a Thanksgiving dinner that couldn’t be beat—all leading up to the landmark four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Mayflower settlers who landed at this location sometime in late December 1620 and began to plant the seeds of an American origin story. *Plymouth 400*, the town’s official celebratory website, billed the event as an “anniversary of national and international significance,” and certainly there was every expectation

that, along with publicity, pomp, and media coverage, tourist dollars would come streaming in as part of this elaborate exercise in nation-affirmation. It was to be a huge spectacle-driven reminder that Plymouth is, at least according to its own promotional materials, “America’s Hometown” (*Plymouth 400*).¹

As with everything else in 2020, however, the careful plans were largely undone by the onset of COVID-19 and the corresponding quarantines that have discouraged, if not entirely shut down, the flow of visitors to the town. Most of the scheduled events were either moved online or canceled altogether, and the town of Plymouth may have to wait yet another hundred years before it finds a similar opportunity to so richly exploit the mythohistorical materials to which it lays claim.²

In another sense, however, Plymouth may have been spared a significant blow to its self-image. Sweeping across the nation in 2020, with equal force as the coronavirus, was the news of the May 25 death of George Floyd, a Black man who, like too many before him, had his life brutally snuffed out by a white police officer whose blatant and excessive use of force proved a breaking point in the way the US regards its long legacy of racial discrimination. In the wake of Floyd’s death came marches and protests by those demanding equal justice in the American legal system, prompting violent pushback by the political establishment in power, but also sparking an unprecedented drive to dislodge monuments and markers throughout the country—symbols that had long stood as bold and glaring reminders of the white supremacist structure that continues, even now, to prop up the United States’ 244-year-long experiment in representative democracy. Monuments to the Confederacy (and even to Columbus), having successfully resisted previous waves of dissent, were suddenly being toppled from their pedestals or hoisted from town squares. Confederate flags were no longer tolerated in spaces where, in the past, they had been freely and enthusiastically displayed. And the names of streets, schools, and military bases continue to undergo revision as the movement to eradicate racism in this country takes a decidedly historical turn. It wasn’t enough, people suddenly realized, to demand equal justice. The US had to finally begin to grapple more responsibly with its past and the way the narrative of that past has been preserved and perpetuated in the public sphere. And in light of all this, the little town of Plymouth, with its plethora of public shrines to

settler colonialism, might understandably be relieved to have the national spotlight, suddenly and unexpectedly, turned elsewhere.

As with other such sites that, until this moment, had managed to survive repeated assaults on their legitimacy, Plymouth, too, has withstood any number of historical broadsides. Its weather-beaten face has been exposed over and over again to the winds of political change, yet it has proven such a resilient cornerstone in the way that dominant history is narrated in the US that none have been able to evict it or plant a more evocative and sustaining narrative in its stead. As Sacvan Bercovitch pointed out some thirty years ago, the Puritan's "New World errand" was perceived as a "part of church history," its providential meanings gathered from "the pre-ordained scheme of redemption" (Bercovitch 46). The settlers of New England were expert at crafting rhetorical stances linking their endeavors to that of Christian progress. And *America* (meaning, for our contemporary purposes, the United States) itself was envisioned as a stepping-stone on the path to salvation, planted there by God so that his covenanted people might make their final ascent to glory. Much of this was neatly symbolized by the Puritans making their first footfall on Plymouth Rock.

Nevertheless, the transformative nature of ongoing conflicts, protests, and debates playing out quite literally in the streets (and even in the Capitol building) of the US is likely to have a significant impact on the manner in which future historians reflect on the legacies of social and racial inequality embedded in the Plymouth narrative. Lisa Blee and Jean O'Brien attest that "as the mythologized origin of the nation (and English settler colonial memory), Plymouth is a crucial site for disrupting the dominant narrative of Indian acquiescence and disappearance at the root of so many other memorial controversies across the country." And as early as 2019, they predicted already that a "reckoning" was due (205). For the moment, William Bradford still stands at the base of Cole's Hill, surveying the terrain of what he once referred to as a "hideous and desolate wilderness," but it is of interest to see how the story of Plymouth colony withstands this sea change or if the latest historical works composed to address Plymouth's legacy can adequately meet the challenges threatening to upend one of America's most cherished historical narratives (Bradford 112).

Too often, however, the colonial world on which historians report is colored by the limited and often jaundiced lens through which the Puri-

tans themselves regarded it. Just as there has been a dire need to reevaluate this nation's ongoing relationship with its confederate past, the manner in which European colonization of these lands continues to be reported remains troubled by the dominance of settler colonial documentation, which is often treated as, for lack of a better word, scripture. An overpowering tendency persists in which historians—even those critical of certain aspects of settler colonial legacies—make their accommodations with the recorded characterizations, justifications, and orderings of events left us by the Puritans, denoting a dependency on the written word that can at times strain credulity and disregards Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot's warning that all “historical production is itself historical” (145).

The fault lines this phenomenon exposes in the historical record run largely along representations of Indigenous and Africanist presence in the colonies. Native peoples necessarily play a central role in the early history of colonization, and yet their cultures, their political structures, and even their most basic motives for acting remain subject to interpretive strategies that are sorely lacking in objectivity or Indigenous-centered frameworks. Native peoples are rarely consulted in the production of US historical narratives, and too often when they are consulted, it is in a perfunctory manner—an act of rhetorical mitigation rather than a committed engagement with Indigenous scholarship and perspectives. Well-meaning histories continue to be produced, but, in a very real sense, they leave the settler colonial monuments still standing and the story that gets told cannot help but unfold within their shadow.

In a recent essay in *EAL*, Native Studies scholars Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Caroline Wigginton, and Kelly Wisecup promote the use of Native-centered methodologies in the study of early American literature. They recognize that because early American scholars have relied “primarily on materials in archives created by and for colonists, their aims and biases have historically configured the field” (415). The authors of the essay submit that early American studies from its “earliest manifestations made its name by studying materials devoted to justifying European settlement in the Americas and to defending the particular socioeconomic, religious, linguistic, and environmental qualities by which colonists defined themselves. We have access to particular documents and texts for various reasons: because they were records of imperial administration or created as part of religious missions” (416). By reporting on these documents uncriti-

cally, scholars run the risk of "retransmitting the biases and assumptions encoded in colonists' language and worldviews" (416). An appropriately engaged response to this problem would be to develop interpretive strategies to more skillfully negotiate the rhetoric of settler colonialism and to draw as much as possible from Indigenous source material that has, until only very recently, been all but ignored in the monumental effort to record this regional history.

If these seem like reasonable corrections, it has nonetheless proven difficult for historians and institutions to finish, as the authors of the above essay argue, "completing the turn" (407). Debates about the reliability of Indigenous materials and methodologies persist, prompting some scholars to question their usage while others remain reluctant to fully incorporate such materials into their work, fearing that such an approach risks *politicizing* the material. In a recent edition of the *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), David J. Silverman entered into this debate with an essay questioning the objectivity of the "collaborative" brand of scholarship being called for in Indigenous Studies forums, and speaking in particular to the works of historian Lisa Brooks (Abenaki) and Christine DeLucia, both of whom have recently published acclaimed books of their own on New England's colonial period. The debate opened up by Silverman is by no means a simple one, but it strikes at the very heart of how settler colonial history can and should be narrated moving forward. There are three central questions at stake: To what extent must historians and scholars work to decode the discourse of power encrypted in colonial documents? What are reasonable strategies for doing so? And what is the human cost if we continue to abdicate this responsibility?

Silverman's essay does us a service, perhaps, by bringing these vital questions to the fore. Silverman maintains what Trouillot refers to as a "positivist" outlook, understanding that to reach beyond what is explicitly recorded in the archive is to move beyond the scope of history. He sees NAIS (Native American and Indigenous Studies) methodologies as an attempt to dilute documentary primacy, "broadening what we count as evidence and challenging our confidence in the written record" (519). And he is correct. To be a scholar of Native history, culture, and literature is to have a basic mistrust of the colonial archive—it is, in fact, to know with absolute certainty, that the written record deceives, obfuscates, buries, and outright lies, particularly when it speaks on the subject of Native presence on the

North American continent. Such “lies” are often deliberate, but they operate on many levels—a kind of colonial gaslighting—with even the most casual language brought to bear on Indigenous identity insinuating its incompatibility with, and perishability in regard to, American “progress.” Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor refers to these rhetorical productions as “manifest manners” and argues that every aspect of Indigenous life in the dominant record is a simulation forwarded, consciously or not, in the service of colonial conquest.

Not surprisingly, however, mainstream historians have viewed it the other way around, suggesting it is NAIS scholars who are “ beholden to identity politics” to an extent that destabilizes “the honest study” of a particular era (Silverman 520). By “trumpeting” their allegiance to “descendant communities” and the historical narratives preserved through oral tradition and other material means, Indigenous Studies scholars are perceived as taking liberties not in conformity with accepted historical practices. One can only gesture to the irony in this stance that assumes the colonial archive is somehow unencumbered by identity politics of its own or that mainstream historians maintain a kind of pristine objectivity that never advances cultural assumptions or ahistorical conclusions rooted in the privileges that adhere to the “descendant communities” of whites or whiteness in general.

Still, it’s worth noting that, rather than dispense with the established rigors of the historical discipline, a great many NAIS scholars have proven expert at both mining the colonial archive and exposing it. Formative works by Lisa Brooks, Christine DeLucia, Jean O’Brien, Philip Round, Hillary Wyss, and others have proven to be diligently researched resources, revealing the ways that the archive, when approached from a decolonized perspective, offers up its own contradictory evidence to dominant perspectives. But these scholars have also, as Silverman notes, worked to broaden what we regard as “textual.” Indigenous cultural productions such as wampum, awikhigans, baskets, birchbark hieroglyphs, and other artifacts largely ignored or misunderstood by white historians performed functions similar to that of writing and have historical value that helps complicate colonial narratives and fill in gaps where Indigenous lives and agency have been so brutally neglected. Learning how to include these materials in historical recovery work and making a space for Indigenous perspectives is the challenge for all historians seeking to write about this period. And al-

though most historians acknowledge this responsibility, few, it seems, are prepared to work productively or inclusively to achieve the desired result.

Which brings us back around to the four hundredth anniversary of the Plymouth landing. As might be expected, a number of historians have attempted to capitalize on this moment by offering new evaluations of Plymouth colony’s legacy, with the potential to draw on the most recent scholarship and fresh historical perspectives in presenting a more complex and, perhaps, less celebratory, account of this storied settlement. This essay will review four of these new books (listed in the title), all of which have come into print in the space of 2019–20, with the intent of providing an overview of each book and its contribution to the field, but also thinking through each book’s particular engagement within Indigenous frameworks for understanding this foundational American narrative. The authors under review are all accomplished scholars in their fields and offer indisputable insights into their subject matter. For those who continue to maintain a vision of Plymouth as America’s metaphorical hometown, these works will mostly be a welcome addition to that narrative. For those who view Plymouth as an early mile marker in the ascent of settler colonial violence, these same works will, perhaps, provoke more questions than answers.

Both Francis J. Bremer’s *One Small Candle* and John G. Turner’s *They Knew They Were Pilgrims* maintain a sharp focus on the lives of the small congregation of Puritans who began their careers as religious dissenters in the village of Scrooby, England, moved their congregation to Leiden in the Netherlands in 1608, and then boarded the *Mayflower* in 1620 to make their way to North America where they founded Plymouth colony. Although others who made that first landing were not of that small tight-knit group, the narrative has been shaped by the cultural, spiritual, and legal hegemony the Scrooby settlers maintained over the colony in its formative years, and it is through their accounts that much of the story has become known. Both Bremer’s and Turner’s books are crisply written, draw from a well of meticulous research, and present this material in a lucid and informative style.

Bremer, a historian of Puritan history and culture, explicitly sets out to challenge and revise mainstream perceptions of the Plymouth origin story—beliefs, he tells us, that “the best efforts of scholars have done little to dislodge” (6). For most of us, such beliefs are internalized in grade school

and fortified along the way through a series of paradoxical pop-culture representations that alternately view the Puritans as severe, intolerant, witch-persecuting prudes or, conversely, as intrepid freedom-seekers who cleared a halo of light from the heathen wilderness while also generously breaking bread with their Indigenous neighbors. These reductive perceptions are further complicated, Bremer claims, by a long-standing tradition of “scholarly disdain” (6). While Bremer never identifies the precise source of this alleged “disdain,” we might imagine it comes from a generation of scholars who have labored to open this narrative up to a wider range of cultural influences. As such, Bremer’s book must be regarded as an effort to safeguard against such incursions and recuperate the reputation of this small band of settlers.

Bremer defines his intention, in the early pages of the book, to focus on the religious lives of these Puritans, seeking to clarify their esoteric and evolving belief systems as they made the pilgrimage from Europe to North America. William Brewster, whose home served as the birthplace of the Scrooby congregation, is positioned at the center of the story, his life and the example of his leadership providing a framing device for the overall narrative. We begin to see the Scrooby congregation in light of the larger Reformation movement taking place in the early seventeenth century, but we also begin to understand them as a discrete flock, gathering under the spiritual leadership of Brewster and John Robinson, their pastor, resolved to resist the corruptions they perceived infiltrating the Church of England. Bremer’s ability to penetrate the English and Dutch side of the Plymouth settlers’ story and succinctly break down the painstaking minutia of religious conflicts and convictions at play must be appreciated for the difficult work it is. Controversies such as how professions of “grace” by those seeking admittance into the congregation were qualified, whether ministers should wear the surplice, and the role of “prophesying” in the Puritan church are just a few of the matters discussed in detail with informed reference to the source material and the intellectual development of each idea.

Perhaps the most significant movement Bremer identifies is the spiritual evolution of Robinson himself, who begins his career as a strict separatist, accusing the larger church of having “dark midnight for vision” (qtd. in Bremer 51), but whose views on separatism soften even as his congregation drifts geographically farther from the central Anglican church. He reminds us that Robinson even came around to allowing prophesying by

women in his congregation, a shift that contributes to the more tolerant portrait Bremer attempts to paint of these Puritans (31). Bremer identifies Robinson as a true seeker—one who is committed to keeping the lines of communication open in his “search for the further understanding of God’s truth” (55). Comprehending this outlook is characterized as “critical to understanding the beliefs they [the Puritans] brought with them to the New World” (55). By keeping in conversation with other spiritual intellectuals of his time, Robinson ultimately softens his earlier stances, moving his flock (some four hundred strong at its height in Leiden) toward an acceptance of preaching in other parish assemblies (60). This understanding leads us, perhaps, toward a less rigid view of the Plymouth settlers themselves, who were not strict separatists as we are often told, but apparently believed with Robinson (and Brewster), in the breaking down of barriers “between Godly believers” (59).

Bremer adequately sums up the social and political developments that pressured the congregants to finally vacate Leiden and take their chances on the North American continent. Upon their decision to leave, the government encouraged Robinson’s congregation to form a settlement under Dutch colonial authority, “to plant there the true, pure Christian religion and to instruct the wild [Natives] of those lands in the true teaching and to bring them to belief” (67). Although this offer was ultimately rejected, it is an early indicator of how the Plymouth settlers, themselves, might have understood their so-called “errand in the wilderness.” All told, the precolonial portion of the settlers’ story is seen as significant enough that it takes over a third of this book, but also, unfortunately, it sets the stage for a too narrow focus once the settlers make landfall on what comes to be known as Plymouth Plantation.

It is one thing to acknowledge that the Puritan leaders were religious seekers whose minds were earnestly set on unlocking biblical mysteries and what they perceived to be spiritual truths in the construction of their Godly community. But this implied earnestness should not provide intellectual cover for contemporary historians to excuse their actions on coming to North America or make light of violent appropriations that occurred. As was true of almost all Europeans coming to these shores, the Plymouth settlers carried with them an unshakeable sense of cultural superiority to the Indigenous peoples whose lands they would usurp. They made no secret of the fact that they interpreted their presence here as an

expression of God's will and their ultimate conquests, however violent, troubling, and inconsistent with their own religious and civic codes, as an extension of that will.

Despite his own acknowledgment that "sources written by the colonists must be used with caution," Bremer's work is firmly fixed in the orbit of his Puritan subjects and their ethnocentrically based representations of Indigenous identity (83). There is not space here to detail each example, but a few may suffice to speak for the whole. Bremer does little to counterbalance the view forwarded by William Bradford that this newly settled territory was anything other than a "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men" (qtd. on 94). Bremer acknowledges that the Plymouth settlement was planted on lands vacated by the Patuxet after crippling disease decimated that community, but he offers no extended examination of how these cleared and previously planted landscapes contradict Bradford's dire, and typologically rooted, "wilderness" claims—an omission that leaves intact the preconceived notions most Americans today still have of New England as an undeveloped waste. While a chapter is included offering an ethnographic sketch of Native civilization prior to settlement, it is a perfunctory gesture, the shortest chapter in the book, in fact, and fails to elevate Native peoples from a static state of development. We are offered the complex backstory of Tisquantum, or Squanto, a surviving member of the Patuxet community, who famously spoke English to the colonists on their arrival and presumably taught them how to plant in the thin New England soil. Bremer's conclusion regarding Squanto, however, that he developed "an affection for the English" (90), lends credence to the notion that the Patuxet survivor bequeathed his blessings on the settler occupation of his lands—an age-old trope in the service of conquest that can be seen echoed in countless dominant cultural productions dating back two hundred years. The settlers, themselves, were not so sure, and Edward Winslow, one of the early Puritan chroniclers, noted that they would have gladly done without Tisquantum, save "he was so necessary and profitable an instrument as, at that time, we could not miss him" (Winslow 65).

Bremer maintains the resilient historical perception that Plymouth's expansion into Indigenous territories was upheld by "purchase in treaty," relying on documentary evidence the settlers produced to manufacture this sense of legitimacy (98). Such a tacit claim dismisses the work of numerous Indigenous Studies scholars who have demonstrated in detail the levels

of coercion and subterfuge that produced these documents.³ While it is certain that documents exist to corroborate Bremer's stance, the claim is presented without any acknowledgment of the controversy, or even that certain contemporaries of the settlers, including Thomas Morton, Roger Williams, and John Easton, deputy governor of the Rhode Island colony, also openly challenged such claims.

Bremer's treatment of the 1623 conflict at Wessagusset offers another telling moment in which the questionable acts of the Plymouth settlers are strategically omitted. The historical charges against Witawamet, the Native leader at Wessagusset have always been thin and unsubstantiated. He was perceived to have been plotting an assault on members of Thomas Weston's newly formed colony, but, if so, Weston's men, whom the Plymouth settlers ostensibly came to save, seemed woefully unaware of their own peril. Nevertheless, as related in Winslow's 1624 *Good News from New England*, Miles Standish, the Plymouth military commander, came to Wessagusset under the semblance of wanting to trade with the Natives, but thereafter preceded to ambush them and take their lives. If one doubts the treacherous nature of this "pre-emptive" assault, Winslow himself affirms it, noting that the Natives' own "treacherous" nature made it "impossible to deal with them upon open defiance but to take them in such traps as they lay for others" (91). The Plymouth settlers had never experienced or witnessed such treachery themselves, but this did not prevent them from presuming a level of expertise on the subject. Bremer does note that Standish "surprised" the Natives at Wessagusset, but his erasure of the fuller conflict—how, for instance, Witawamet was taken from behind and stabbed with his own knife—allows him to justify Standish's actions in accordance with some vague notions of English military tradition and Bremer swiftly shifts the conversation back to the establishment of "The Godly Community" at Plymouth (107–9). Interactions with the Indigenous peoples of this land quickly fade from general commentary, and we are left with a work that, however unintentionally, succeeds in placing good and pious Puritans, with their "one small candle" held up against the vast wilderness, at the center of a narrative arc bending toward American exceptionalism.

As I mentioned earlier, Turner's book follows a template very similar to Bremer's, with its focus on the Scrooby congregation and its famed odyssey to Leiden and then Plymouth. Turner is a professor of religious studies and, like Bremer, brings a great deal of insight to the esoteric spiri-

tual struggles that would do so much to shape the culture of the Puritan colonies in North America. He does a commendable job of tracking the development of Puritan thought through Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation, hinging his interpretation of this spiritual progression on the concept of liberty. Liberty, in the sense that Turner introduces it, has two separate connotations. One is the somewhat paradoxical notion of Christian free will to choose a pious life, or, in Luther's words, to become "captive to the will of God" (qtd. in Turner 10). The other is the tradition of civil liberty, which speaks to the broader freedom to choose one's own religious and civil affiliations. Both of these might be construed as belonging to the "American Liberty" referenced in the book's subtitle.

Congregationalism itself was an early exercise in liberty, forwarding the belief that communities, rather than bow to a centralized governing authority, should form their own congregations with their own freely chosen spiritual leaders. Questions of religious liberty would resurface in later colonial debates, over who if anyone had the ability to claim or determine justification (the gift of God's grace) and whether or not one practiced a covenant of works or a covenant of grace on the road to sanctification. While such discussions are not new to scholars in the field, Turner does a good job of making these debates accessible and offers a precise genealogy of how the debates developed and worked their way into the lives of the Scrooby congregants. Religious liberty, if not synonymous with civil liberty, nevertheless opened the door for the idea that kings and magistrates could not dictate or "command men's consciences" (30). Free will suggested that individuals were given by God the choice to believe or not believe and a covenant of grace, properly interpreted, suggested that justification was God's gift alone that no intermediary, whether pastor or king, could influence. This did not necessarily free someone to openly express dissenting opinions, but it provided some interesting intellectual wiggle room between the individual and state-mandated religion both in England and in the colonies.

Although he traces the development of progressively harsher stances against the reformists from the end of Elizabeth I's reign through that of James I, Turner maintains that the Scrooby congregationalists "did not suffer severe persecution" as is commonly believed (24). At the very least, their grievances were exaggerated by the later writings of Bradford and others and, ironically, it wasn't until they attempted to flee England that

they were arrested and harassed for trying to illegally leave the country. Although the congregation did ultimately find its way to Leiden, the environment there, as Turner notes, did not suit their purposes as they found themselves economically marginalized and confronted with, ironically, too much religious liberty in the Netherlands where they perceived "heresy and libertinism" were allowed to flourish (36).

Turner maintains his focus on the Scrooby congregationalists as they make their way to North America, but more so than Bremer, he exposes the inherent tensions in their project of colonization—what he characterizes as the alternative and more "dispiriting history" of "betrayal and theft" in which land was forcefully wrested from Indigenous inhabitants who were subsequently killed or enslaved (1). Turner opens his book by highlighting these issues, and for the most part, he carries them through. For instance, Turner narrates the Wessagusset raid in all of its grisly detail, correctly referring to Witawamet's death by stabbing as a "murder" (98). Like Bremer, he determines that "within a culture of violent punishment, what the Pilgrims did was brutal but in many respects unexceptional" (99), but Turner at least directly addresses the violent nature of the raid and highlights the ambiguities animating the settlers' actions. If the safety of the Weston colony was truly in eminent danger, why did so many of them live without fear, Turner wonders, and "was there really a conspiracy" against Plymouth colony, or was their preemptive strike simply an attempt to eliminate a rival English colony (100)? While these questions do not necessarily situate Turner's scholarship within an Indigenous Studies context, they do begin the work of decolonization by not tacitly accepting the justifications offered by the settlers themselves. As we know, Robinson, who didn't cross the Atlantic with his congregation, was himself critical of this raid, writing to Bradford "how happy a thing had it been . . . if you had converted some [Natives], before you had killed any" (qtd. in Turner 100).

Turner offers an equally unblinking look at the 1636–37 Pequot War, an event Bremer fails to even mention save to mark the day of thanksgiving the Pilgrims declared upon claiming victory (Bremer 159). This conflict resulted not only in the violent deaths of some six hundred to eight hundred Pequot civilians burned alive by the colonists in their fort at Mystic, but the enslavement of the Pequot people and the first colonial laws regarding slavery in North America (168–74). As Turner acknowledges, Bradford viewed this act of genocide as a "sweet" sacrifice to God, whom he saw

as punishing the Pequots for their evil natures (Turner 170). Such events help to clarify the paradoxical views on liberty that the Plymouth settlers brought with them to the North American continent.

Turner's book follows through to King Philip's (or Metacom's) War in the 1670s, which is also given a fair and measured treatment despite recurring moments in the narrative where the official archive requires further challenging. At one point, speaking of the famous account Captain Benjamin Church left of the war, Turner warns that "historians should use Benjamin Church's self-glorifying memoir with caution" (270). This, however, speaks directly to the problems of methodology highlighted by Indigenous Studies scholars. Which of the Puritan documents are, in fact, not self-glorifying? Should not the entire colonial archive be approached with equal caution? To settle on just one example, Turner writes, "It is clear that Philip *loathed* Sassamon" (*italics mine*), an educated "praying Indian" whose alleged murder (for which three of Philip's counsellors were tried and executed) is often seen as the catalyst for the war. We are told that Philip, chief sachem of the Wampanoags and often seen as the leader of the combined Native tribes fighting in the conflict that bears his name, viewed Christianity itself as "a threat to the authority and stability" of his government (274). Painting Philip as antagonistic to Christian belief was one of the principal propaganda objectives of the colonists in the lead-up to the war, and making Christianity a cause of enmity between Philip and Sassamon provided the *casus belli* needed to pursue total warfare. The idea that Sassamon (who most likely drowned while ice-fishing) had been murdered at all was a notion manufactured by colonial powers after the fact of his death and burial. Desiring war with the Indians, Plymouth governor Josiah Winslow determined that Sassamon's death must have been foul play—a retaliation against his religious conversion. Only then was Sassamon's body exhumed to confirm the preordained conclusion and make of him a Christian Indian martyr.⁴

One is reminded of the words of Josiah's father, Edward Winslow, who said it is "impossible to deal with them [the Natives] upon open defiance but to take them in such traps as they lay for others" (Winslow 91). Ordering evidence to suit their conclusions was established practice in the colonial judicial system. It produced a sense of uniformity and infallibility—a sense that God's will was being exercised through the decisions of colonial magistrates. As such, documentation was invariably created, whether in

the form of legal judgments, land deeds, treaties, or forced confessions, to lend historical credence to these claims. Despite almost unanimous historical consensus, there is, in the final analysis, no convincing archival evidence to suggest that Philip hated either Sassamon or Christianity beyond the secondhand assertions of colonial power brokers. But Philip understood the enormous pressure under which the Wampanoag people were being placed by colonial authorities at Plymouth and elsewhere, and the imposition of Christianity was just one of the many influences being asserted at the expense of his own liberty and the liberty of his people.

Turner has produced a commendable, cogent, and readable history of Plymouth colony—one that is critical of past traditions and begins the important work of decolonizing this formative narrative. As Ivy Schweitzer notes, however, "We must always subject archives . . . to a critical interrogation of the politics of archiving" (Schweitzer 2), and until this idea is internalized and consistently pursued—not just in the most obvious locations—it is unlikely that the narrative of Puritan exceptionalism will be toppled. Carla Gardena Pestana, too, addresses this problem of the archive in her book on *The World of Plymouth Plantation*. She observes that "Plymouth gained a place in our national mythology because eighteenth-century New Englanders—many of them descendants of the first colonists—sought to promote the region as the source of American values" (4). As such, many of the earliest histories of the colony, and much of the popular lore surrounding it, were produced by those invested in promoting their own posterity. Like Turner, Pestana is not out to elevate or defend the legacy of the Plymouth settlers. She recognizes the cultural dynamics by which the narrative of the settlers has acquired status over time and sets out to defuse common misconceptions, beginning with the notion that the settlers at Plymouth were an isolated party, cut off from the rest of the civilized world and left to themselves to tame a desert wilderness. The unifying theme she weaves into her narrative of the settlement is "connectivity," noting that "Plymouth enjoyed, indeed utterly relied upon, links to the wider world. Considering Plymouth as a place connecting to other places shows us this familiar story in a strikingly different light" (9).

More might have been done to develop this thesis and detail its implications, but Pestana seems to be gearing her account for a more general audience and only lightly grazes on this claim. Unlike the works of Bremer and Turner, Pestana's book concentrates mostly on the North American half

of the Pilgrims' odyssey, without some of the explicit scholarly scaffolding these other digest works apply. The book is compact and neatly written, with short easily digestible chapters that read like a series of refined class lectures strung together, albeit not in any linear form. In fact, the book is formatted so that there are very few footnotes and little or no mention is made of the huge body of scholarship on which it draws. Sections of the book are pulled together under seemingly random subheads such as "Wives, Plantations, Guns" (13). In each chapter we learn interesting tidbits concerning, for example, the presence of women in the colony, the politics of indentured servitude, or the circulation of books. A kind of circular narrative springs from this organizational structure, where we often revisit events and claims previously entered, and some of this becomes repetitive.

Although the idea of "connectivity" is a useful one and may prove generative for lay readers, the stops along the way are familiar enough, from the first encounter with the globe-traveling Tisquantum, to the ill-fated Wessagusset colony, to the conflicts with Thomas Morton, whose May Day celebration was famously cut short when John Endicott appeared with a contingent of Puritan storm troopers and chopped down Morton's maypole. Resupply ships appeared with regularity in Plymouth and many, such as Edward Winslow, made return trips to England and experienced multiple Atlantic crossings. These "transients," as Pestana calls them, "each had their own personal histories, ones which carried them into and out of Plymouth. Collectively they added to the fluidity of the population and to the plantation's connections beyond its borders" (57). Little Plymouth colony, an outpost in the wilderness, was connected to the wider world, it turns out, and perhaps this helps readers to understand the plantation itself in a new light.

Nevertheless, the structure of the book works to keep Indigenous peoples in the margins of the narrative. Native individuals appear from time to time to help support a claim, but, as with the other books under review so far, the cultural practices, concerns, and motivations of Native peoples are not considered in any serious fashion. Their role in the narrative remains tertiary at best, so that, for instance, the only mention of the brutal Pequot War appears in a chapter titled "Servants" and is simply there to facilitate a passing reference to the fact that Pequot women and children were enslaved and distributed "in English households" (141). This claim is certainly noteworthy and true, but so devoid of context that it will fail to

leave any kind of substantial intellectual footprint on the minds of readers who know nothing of these violent events.

Finally, David Silverman's new book, *This Land Is Their Land*, sets out to rectify some of the past errors highlighted here, by approaching the European conquest of the area we now call New England from a Wampanoag-centered perspective. Silverman's book starts off in a promising manner, acknowledging the hegemonic power of the Plymouth origin story which continues to uphold "tradition and social order by teaching that the rulers came by their position heroically, righteously, and even with the blessing of the divine" (1). He helps to frame his narrative with the twentieth-century example of Frank James of the Aquinnah Wampanoags who, in 1970, disinvited himself from the official Thanksgiving Day festivities taking place at Plymouth and held his own ceremony instead, an Indigenous Day of Mourning, for which he delivered a famously scathing speech (famous in Indigenous circles at least), debunking the myth of Indigenous/settler harmony that adheres to the first Thanksgiving story (1–21).

Silverman duly acknowledges the complexity of telling the Wampanoags' side of the story—the "limits of historical sources, which at best make recovering the Native American past difficult, and at worst make it impossible" (18). This acknowledgment, however, seems intended as a kind of preemptive defense for the positivist approach to history-making that, as mentioned earlier, Silverman champions. Silverman is a rigorous historian and, of all the works discussed here, his strikes me as the most deeply researched overall, as well as the most layered in its approach toward Indigenous peoples. But this also makes it all the more frustrating that his history allows itself to be guided by colonial tropes and characterizations that should be as shopworn by now as confederate monuments in the public square.

Admittedly, it is difficult to break out of these routines, and the process of decolonizing history is an ongoing one for all of us who engage in this endeavor. Historical episodes, such as when the Wampanoags famously approached the Plymouth settlers on the spring equinox of 1621 suggesting a peace treaty between the two peoples, have acquired a scripted quality, the outline for which has been reinforced by the preeminence of a thousand other colonial encounters scripted in a like manner. Silverman tells us "there is no accounting for why the Natives extended this helping hand, no sense that their behavior was a strategic response to their historical

circumstances” (98). But I question whether Silverman is privileging a Wampanoag perspective by forwarding such a claim. This so-called unaccountability only holds up if you fail to acknowledge the Wampanoags as a diplomatic people, or the fact that Indigenous encounters with settlers up and down the eastern seaboard were defined, initially at least, by similar gestures of peaceful accord. Once you begin to look at it carefully, peeling away the layers of harsh colonial rhetoric that paint these encounters with hostile undertones and intentions, a different narrative emerges in which the actions of the Wampanoags at this crucial juncture are not only accountable but predictable. If we really want to restructure our understanding of these events from a perspective that respects and honors the customs of Indigenous peoples, we must begin to discern the ceremonial structure in which such encounters took place, the intentional bearing of peacemakers like Samoset who placed himself at great risk by walking alone into the Puritan encampment, the gestures of gift exchange, the careful incremental diplomacy that, in this particular case, led to a successful larger summit between the leaders of Plymouth colony and Massasoit, or Ousamequin, paramount sachem of the Wampanoags. There is every reason to believe the Wampanoags initiated all of this in 1621, not out of “desperation” as Silverman ultimately suggests (98), but out of deep abiding custom. The Wampanoags were people who understood the value of peace and wished for sustained security and comfort in their homelands for those under their charge.

In his *AHR* essay, Silverman objects to the assumption he finds forwarded by Lisa Brooks that Native leaders in the seventeenth century always “acted in accord with high-minded, community-based principles” (“Living” 521). But this is not necessarily Brooks’s project. Rather, it is to acknowledge that Native leaders, regardless of our overall human capacity to, perhaps, fall short of such ideals, *could* and often *did* act in accordance with high-minded, community-oriented principles and that such principles were consistent with larger traditional values—a notion white historians have somehow found it difficult to embrace, despite allowing for such qualities in their colonial subjects.

Too many historians, including Silverman, adhere to a script in which Indigenous leaders of New England are comparable to stereotypical presentations of modern-day TV drug lords, scrimmaging over turf and tributes rather than being represented as diplomats and statesmen con-

cerned about their communities, their kinship networks, and their cultural survival. Wampum, beads and belts made from shells that northeastern Natives distributed with a diverse range of ceremonial and diplomatic significance, is never treated as anything more than currency—a colonial bastardization of its traditional value. Silverman states that the reason the Wampanoag alliance with Plymouth “gets such outsized attention in patriotic treatments of American history is that, on the surface, it was the peaceful exception to the violent rule of Indian-colonial relations” (205). But this simply isn’t true. In New England alone, the colonists maintained peaceful relations with the Mohegan, Narragansett, Nipmuc, and Massachusetts Natives over the initial fifty-five years of settlement. It wasn’t until the settlers decidedly forced the issue that war became an inevitability in 1675. But this is not a story in which many Americans feel an emotional investment, and Silverman, too, disregards the overtures of peace as a cultural practice embedded in Wampanoag tradition, instead defining this moment as a rare instance of detente orchestrated from a position of martial exigency on the part of Massasoit. Interestingly enough, one of the rare instances in which Silverman actually refers to the “diplomacy” of Natives is when he advances what he calls Philip’s “anti-colonial diplomacy” (293)—a negative term suggestive of a kind of subterfuge as Philip presumably plotted against the colonists.

Silverman does ultimately concede that it was the colonists who provoked King Philip’s War. He writes, “English disrespect for Wampanoag sovereignty had grown so brazen that Plymouth now felt entitled to judge and capitally execute Wampanoags for purported incidents that involved only Wampanoags on Wampanoag lands [referring here to the alleged murder of John Sassamon]. The apparent next step was to arrest Pumetacom [Philip] himself” (296). But Silverman’s concession comes with a caveat that, while claiming to offer a more nuanced reading of events, ostensibly walks back this claim. To presume that English colonists worked in league with one another to disenfranchise Natives from their lands appears to necessitate a level of coordination between legislators and land brokers that Silverman finds improbable (never mind that we see it happening on a regular basis in our own era and nowhere as frequently as on Native lands). By remaining skeptical of the idea that settler colonial leaders either misrepresented or manipulated their accounts in order to legitimize a pattern of immoral land grabs, Silverman is directly challenging claims made by

Lisa Brooks, Jean O'Brien, and other Indigenous Studies scholars who do, in fact, find these machinations to be deliberate. Brooks's own reading of the land transactions taking place in the buildup to King Philip's War leads her to claim in her Bancroft Prize-winning *Our Beloved Kin* that, "rather than settlement and war appearing by happenstance . . . both were intricately intertwined with the intent to claim Wampanoag lands" (121).

This is not to say that there can't be room for legitimate disagreement and interpretation of the facts. Nor does agreeing to adopt Native Studies methodologies presume a uniformity of opinions and readings. But there is a reason why Silverman finds himself in contention with Brooks, DeLucia, and others who argue for new methodologies to interpret this old history. These new methodologies challenge the authority of colonial texts and, in many ways the authority of the historians who rely on them, or as DeLucia characterizes it, those who "position themselves as gatekeepers over the means by which history is researched, interpreted, and expressed" (528).

The works evaluated here all have merit and will be not only informative and enjoyable, but perhaps even preferable, to a great many readers who feel a familiar comfort in having the narrative of the Puritan settlers resituated for them in a manner that leaves the old statues and icons of settler colonialism tarnished, perhaps, but still standing. To truly commit to a retelling of this narrative, taking into account Indigenous perspectives in the manner recently attempted by Brooks, risks rendering the story alien to its readership, turning its heroes into disreputable and often deplorable figures, pushing back against the trope of the vanishing Native, and troubling us with the ongoing presence and resistance of Indigenous peoples. It ultimately threatens the very legitimacy on which this nation claims its sovereign rights—this hometown soil "gifted" us by the Indians of lore. But more importantly, when we don't adopt these practices, we risk getting the history terribly wrong, by continuing to present Native peoples and cultures in a reductive and pejorative light that effectively cancels out their contribution, their civilization, and their collaboration in the making of what the United States is today. Certain scholars may claim that the Native is not their subject—it is the story of the Puritans, themselves, they have chosen to relate. But there are compelling reasons to ask why such a particular focus is chosen, who it serves, and what violence it continues to perpetuate.

Silverman, to his credit, gets this right at the end of his book and offers

his readers a strong reminder of Wampanoag presence and revitalization in our own times, including reference to the Wopanâak Language Revitalization Project and the ongoing struggles of the Mashpee Wampanoag on Cape Cod to maintain their legal status as a federally recognized tribe (413–18). He reminds us of the powerful words of William Apess, the nineteenth-century Pequot author, activist, and minister who told his audiences that the landing at Plymouth Rock was a day of mourning for the Indians and not of celebration (405). And until we allow ourselves to see it this way as well and confront the implications of this awareness, there will remain a troubled legacy that adheres to the sacred iconography of settler colonialism holding its ground in America's "hometown" of Plymouth, and a reckoning that still awaits.

NOTES

1. In a recent issue of *Early American Literature* Jean O'Brien and Lisa Blee discuss the contribution of Wampanoag tribal members to the *Plymouth 400* agenda, a digital exhibition titled *Our Story: 400 Years of Wampanoag History*. This exhibition, featuring short documentary videos, interviews, and other historical contextualization, works to decenter the Plymouth landing from the historical narrative of the region by recognizing a rich and detailed history of Indigenous presence preceding it.
2. Worth noting is that the Indigenous Studies Program at Bridgewater State University managed to hold together its *Plymouth 400* event—an Indigenous History Conference titled "Here It Began: 2020 Hindsight and Foresight," which moved its sessions online over an eight-week period from October to November, concluding the weekend before Thanksgiving. Organized by Joyce Rain Anderson and Linda Coombs, both of the Wampanoag Tribe, the conference invited Indigenous scholars, educators, and tribal members from across the country to reconsider the legacy of settler colonialism and how Native people have continued to survive and thrive in its wake.
3. See Brooks, *The Common Pot* and *Our Beloved Kin*; Lopenzina; O'Brien; and Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*.
4. See Lopenzina 162–70.

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