

## Two John Smiths and a Tent

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**W**hy two John Smiths, and who are they? How are they related to each other? And to a tent? There is an initial mystery in my title that underpins the fact that reading is a form of quest. No matter what we read—this short piece, a novel, a poem—reading is a quest for our questions about the world, questions that very often we do not even know are waiting within us. This is why books sometimes give answers and at other times direct us to other books until, when looking back, we realize that rather than having walked a pre-defined path, we have built a network of paths joining books together. This finely-spun web allows us to move in all directions, back and forth in time, memory, and imagination. In the process, our understanding deepens and the books yield their treasure of meanings.

Let me first introduce the two John Smiths, the protagonists of my story. Epistemologically, they belong to two different worlds, a factual and a fictional one, though I cannot separate either from cultural imagination. Chronologically, they are set at two distinct moments in American history, yet they are connected, for they are twin concretizations of that history. If the factual John Smith (1580-1631)—the founder of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement on American soil—had not existed or had not written about his colonial enterprise the second, fictional, John Smith, the protagonist of Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* (New York, The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996), would not exist either. For it is not by chance that he was given that name. So, you see, there is some connection between the two. But, how are they connected to me?

Well . . . the first John Smith is unavoidable for any teacher of the literature and culture of what has become the United States of America. A few years back, I taught a course on Pocahontas and naturally Smith's narratives provided me

with the necessary documentary sources. This year I included his famous “Letter to Queene Anne” in my two courses, one on the history of the English language in America, the second on “War, Violence and Love in American Literature.” As you probably know, in this letter, written on the occasion of Pocahontas’s arrival in England, Smith tells the queen how his life had been saved by this young native, the favourite daughter of the Powhatan chief, how she was the first convert to Christianity, was baptized, married an Englishman, and bore their child. Most importantly, he reminds the queen that she is indebted to Pocahontas for the new colonial expansion of her kingdom.

John Smith’s writings mark the beginning of American colonial history. This particular letter is also the ground on which one of the founding myths of white, male America is rooted. Both historical and mythical narratives, however, have, in their different ways, influenced contemporary American culture. While historical narratives extrapolate from John Smith’s enterprise, the hegemonic plot of a powerful culture that through its men and institutions conquered the land and its savage inhabitants to build civilization in the wilderness, mythical narratives, particularly in recent years, look back to Smith’s texts to imagine a new beginning, a peaceful relationship between white colonists and native inhabitants, based on the nurturing and life-giving figure of Pocahontas. She is the saviour who, through her child, generates an autonomous American race. Borrowing from Gertrude Stein, Americans could say that she is “the mother of us all.”

In the volume of his selected works that I used in my class, an engraved portrait of Pocahontas is reproduced facing Smith’s letter<sup>i</sup>. I would like to draw your attention to the Latin words written around the portrait and, in particular, to the English caption underneath it, which reads:

Matoaks als Rebecca daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan  
Emperour of Attanougskomuck als Virginia converted and baptized  
in the Christian faith, and Wife to the wor.<sup>th</sup> M<sup>r</sup>. John Rolff. (sic)

Though in his *Map of Virginia* (Oxford, 1612), Smith actually recorded a few sentences of the Powhatan’s language and some of the nouns and place names that then entered the English vocabulary (“moccasins,” “tomahacks,” “werowance,” etc.), what we see at work in the portrait’s caption is the actual process of erasure of Indian names and culture through the re-naming of the girl and her land that goes by the name of Christianization/civilization. As in a

snapshot, the caption captures the very moment when Native American and English languages are held in balance for a moment, before the native language and those who speak it are wiped out.

It is this cancellation of Native Americans' distinctive identity and alterity that forms the background to Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, a novel that I read when it first came out but also happened to be re-reading this year, while teaching my courses. I had first read it for pleasure, as a thriller set in Seattle, written by a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian from a Native American perspective. I remember considering how appropriately Alexie had made Pioneer Park a key location in the novel. I spend many of my summers in Oregon and very often visited Seattle. My first time in the city, however, I was particularly, and negatively, impressed by the displaced, marginalized, often-drunk Indians who peopled Pioneer Park. But in my first quick reading of the book—a signed copy bought at Powell's famous bookstore in Portland—I had not given enough attention to its historical depth and veracity, and to all the implications connected to telling a story, and indirectly re-writing history, from the side of the conquered and silenced. In my second reading, with the British John Smith looming large in my mind, I could hardly avoid seeing the many threads that linked him to the novel's protagonist, spun by their shared name. But beware! The novel's John Smith is not a contemporary, fictional incarnation of his historical avatar. On the contrary, he is the child born to a fourteen-year-old Indian girl, taken away soon after birth to be adopted by white foster parents who give him this unbecoming name. Not a real historical personage, Alexie's John Smith stands for all the dispossessed Indians, with no name of their own, no individuality or specific culture or tribe. And his name is but the tell-tale sign of forced assimilation, the present compendium of centuries of history. Alexie's book, however, is not simply an "Indian" book, for his denunciation of assimilation applies to all ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities in the USA. All assimilation, the novel tells us, comes with a vengeance. It is dangerous for everybody.

In the novel, John is the doomed Indian, the loser. But he has a sort of double, a girl to whom he becomes attached, Marie Polatkin, a Spokane Indian and a fighter. Although completely identified with her own culture, she manages to find for herself a place in a white society she nevertheless criticizes. During the day she brings food to the homeless Indians in Pioneer Park and at night attends

a literature class taught by a white professor with the telling name Clarence Mather, whose authority she challenges. John sees her as a Madonna. But she is not the girl who risks her life for the love of the white man and who bears his American child. She is, rather, the self-confident, courageous Indian woman, a guide and a model for natives and whites alike. She is a reincarnation of both Pocahontas and Sacajewa, hybridized with the Catholic Mary, just as the novel is a critical re-writing of American history that, by bringing to the fore its underside, or reverse side, shows how the conquest affected both whites and Indians, transforming each through contact and exchange. This re-writing is accomplished by twisting the English language, revealing its ambiguity. As Marie points out in the novel:

I mean, calling him the Indian killer doesn't make any sense, does it? If it was an Indian doing the killing, then wouldn't he be called the Killer Indian? I mean, Custer was an Indian Killer, not a killer Indian. (247)

It is at this point that the tent enters my narrative. *The Tent* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006) is the title of a recent collection of short stories published by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. I bought it this summer and read it in the past few days. Its title story seems to me particularly relevant in the light of my previous considerations, for it shows how much American geography and Indian culture have permeated the imagination of the white inhabitants of European origin. The story projects an apocalyptic scenario, a sort of day after, when all civilization has crumbled into ruins and become part of a dark wilderness in which human beings and animals howl menacingly. The narrator, who may be the last sane person in the world, protects herself by hiding within a paper tent, a sort of Indian tepee. She desperately writes on the white paper trying to name a wilderness she can only imagine, to tell about her loved ones and, most of all, to save her life. She keeps writing "because what else can [she] do?" (146) The tepee-shaped page is the mark of the writer's assimilation of Native American culture, but the wilderness that surrounds her narrator is rather different from the desert that early Puritans imagined or the wild that Jack London found deeply buried in humans and animals. Rather, it condenses the horror of a Western civilization that has become self-destructive. Atwood's "The Tent" and Alexie's *Indian Killer* offer us their different critiques of the present, of the shortcomings of an exclusive civilization, white and male-dominated. The

Canadian woman writer and the Spokane American writer project their scenarios of the wilderness our world may become. For both, writing is a critical act and a warning, a gesture of survival that appeals to the human capacity to imagine a possible world, so that one can act in the real world.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The letter was published in John Smith's *General Historie of Virginia, New-England and the Summer Isles...* (London, 1624). *Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of his Writings*, ed. by Karen Ordhal Kupperman, Williamsburg, VA, U of North Carolina P, 1988, 67-73.