Colonialist Anthropology at Colonial Williamsburg

Eric Gable and Richard Handler

One theme in the ongoing critique of anthropology has been the symbiotic relationship between colonial power and the production of ethnographic knowledge. There are at least three strands in this critique. First, it has been pointed out that anthropology would in many cases not have been possible in the absence of colonial power and, indeed, that "the anthropological gaze" replicated epistemologically the arrogance of colonialism. Second, anthropologists have been taken to task for ignoring the colonial situation itself, focusing instead on a romanticized image of the isolated primitive. Third, anthropologists have even been indicted for providing administrators with a language with which to justify their continued control while seemingly modifying particular policies in the direction of more enlightened government.

Our collective professional repudiation of colonialism has led to a significant recasting of anthropology's subject-matter. To escape the entanglements of our colonialist heritage, many of us have turned our analytic skills on colonialism itself, and on colonial representations, rather than on colonized subjects, anthropology's traditional object. The museum is an excellent venue for this sort of analysis, and recent scholarship has gone a long way toward deconstructing the "politics and poetics" of museum representations.[1] Yet it is not enough to deconstruct representations. It is necessary as well to examine the politics of administrative culture, for the work of deconstructing museum representations occurs in the context of those politics, not outside them. What follows, then, is our reflection on the pitfalls of ignoring the third strand in the critique of colonialism—of overlooking, that is, the ways in which one's discourse can become a part of the field of power that one wishes merely to study. In our ongoing ethnographic study of Colonial Williamsburg, one of America's premier outdoor history museums, we found that despite the lessons of history we were as vulnerable to administrative cooptation as any of our colonialist ancestors.

To begin, let us recall that to gain access to a field site (whether colonial or postcolonial) is, almost by definition, to set oneself up to be coopted.

The harder a field site is to get into, the more likely is it that one's intellectual independence will be compromised. Despite the image of open access which museum rhetoric cultivates, we quickly learned that these institutions could be as autocratically closed as any Albania. In 1989, we had decided to launch an ethnographic study of several regional history museums, focusing on the institutional processes through which histories are created and disseminated to the public. We approached curators, historians, and educators at several institutions, most of whom were intrigued by the possibility of ethnographic research which might yield insights that could be useful to them in their work. In the case of two smaller museums, we went from enthusiastic discussions with these middle-level museum professionals to meetings with each institution's director, and in both cases we were refused permission to carry out our study.

One of these institutions, a city history museum, was at the time building a reputation for mounting cutting-edge social history exhibits. The director, who had been brought to the museum several years previously to revive a moribund and outmoded institution, forthrightly explained the difficulties of convincing conservative, southern trustees to go along with exhibits that brought progressive, critical perspectives to bear on social history. His trustees, the director explained, liked the new "look" that he was bringing to the museum—the look of "a New York museum." He had been able to use his board's desire to renew the image of their institution to smuggle in, as it were, perspectives that were not congenial to them. He told us that one trustee, praising the museum's well received exhibits on African-American history, nonetheless confessed to him that he was "niggered out," that is, that he had had enough Black history. The director candidly told us that anthropological researchers, talking too freely to too many people, might upset the balance of the institutional relationships he had to manage to achieve his professional goals.

The second museum that refused us access was a house museum, the home of a famous American of an earlier era. We had already presented a

paper—"Persons of Stature and the Passing Parade"—comparing this museum and Colonial Williamsburg. In the paper, we explained that the house museum made distinctions between elite visitors ("persons of stature") and common visitors ("the passing parade") while systematically hiding what they were doing from the public. We argued that front-line employees in the house museum were generally dismissive of the common public while also chafing at what from their perspective was the arbitrary or adventitious inclusion of people unworthy of distinction into the exalted category of "persons of stature." Ultimately, our point was to show that museums such as this one, which are self-proclaimed "shrines" to American values, face what we called "egalitarian dilemmas" in their day-to-day interactions with visitors. These egalitarian dilemmas boiled down to making distinctions among a mass public while appearing not to do so, and reaching a consensus on hierarchical distinctions which from some perspectives seemed arbitrary.

When we met with the director of the house museum, he complained that our paper was ill informed, based too much on "gossip" from "the guides' kitchen" (i.e., employees' informal, lunch-break talk) and on past policies which were not continuous with present ones. He, too, denied us permission to carry out ethnographic research, saying, in the end, that his institution was already "over-assessed." We were annoyed and bewildered by these refusals. We had, perhaps, been beguiled by the discourse of openness—to multiple perspectives, to democratic debate, to revisionist history, to new ideas—that history museums had cultivated with growing enthusiasm since the early 1970s. We had also found curators and museum historians to be engaged in debate among themselves, and willing to include us in the conversations. The directors, by contrast, seemed interested mainly in managing an image of openness and debate rather than participating in discussions they could not control (cf. Gable 1993). At the time, we grumbled about their hypocrisy; but we should have been grateful to them for revealing to us something of the institutional politics underpinning the exhibits and representations that are the museum's public face.

At Colonial Williamsburg, a much larger institution than either of the two which had turned us down, our request met a different fate. There the corridors of power were remote to us, but we gained access nonetheless, due to the mediation of two historians who were also corporate vice presidents. After months of waiting, we learned of the favorable outcome of a closed-door meeting in which our proposed research had been considered. One of our historian-advocates reported to us that despite the opposition of some of his colleagues on the "business side" of the nonprofit corporation, he and his allies had been able to use the rhetoric of museum openness to win our case. His published account of the matter suggests that questions of public relations and image were central to the debate:

> After considerable soul-searching, Williamsburg agreed to be Handler's [and Gable's] Samoa, even after a sister institution got cold feet and backed out of [their] proposal for a two-part comparative study. We concluded that we had more to learn than lose from [their] observations. All the same, I daresay that my colleagues would not have risked potentially embarrassing "bad press" if they had not been confident that the educational philosophy that guides the [Colonial Williamsburg] Foundation's work is responsible and defensible. (Carson 1991:94)

So we began our fieldwork, grateful to our patrons but also curious about their agenda. What was in it for them? At the time we concocted a Trojan Horse theory to account for the institutional politics which might have motivated our patrons. In this scenario, we were the ostensibly unbiased experts whose academic authority would lend weight to insider intellectuals' developing critique of institutional inertia. Colonial Williamsburg, as an insider joke had it, was a "Republican Disneyland." The joke alludes to a salient critique leveled at the museum by intellectuals both inside and beyond the academy. To these elites, Colonial Williamsburg is kitsch. It creates a sanitized version of the nation's past (Gable and Handler 1994a), long on the kind of inspirational boosterism that some people (read Republicans) believe made our country great, and short on the dirty truth of our collective past. Like kitsch, like Disneyland, there is a curious obsession with simulation—Umberto Eco (1986) calls it hyperreality—but simulation is squeaky clean, more congenial to conservatives than to liberals. But most of all, Disneyland is "inauthentic." In this critique, then, there is a neat confluence of aesthetics, politics, and science. Kitsch is too clean; the real thing is dirtier—literally, but also metaphorically.

If Colonial Williamsburg could be described as a Republican Disneyland, its leading historians, our patrons among them, described themselves as "Young Turks." These scholars, trained in the 1960s, were bent on remaking a moribund institution by replacing its sanitized "silk-pants" patriotism with the dirtier and more realistic "new social history." According to the Young Turks, the

museum's conservatism had two sources: older "front-line" employees and the business people who staffed its bureaucracy. In this perspective, older employees were inflexibly committed, by training and by inclination, to the patriotic, Cold-War-era histories the Young Turks wished to replace; and, beyond the details of any given historical narrative, the culture and values of business people did not encourage critical social thinking.

The tension between business values and educational values was one of the first things that struck us about the culture of Colonial Williamsburg, where a perceived dichotomy between the Foundation's educational and business "sides" was frequently a topic of discussion. Colonial Williamsburg is a medium-sized nonprofit corporation (its annual budget is over 130 million dollars) with an institutional infrastructure prototypical of the postmodern culture industry. The Foundation runs hotels, restaurants, and merchandising operations as well as educational programs, exhibits, and collections. Dependent upon ticket receipts from nearly one million visitors each year, Colonial Williamsburg administrators believe that teaching history to a mass public is as much concerned with "entertainment" as it is with "education" (cf. Greenhalgh 1989). Indeed, these two terms are constantly used by Foundation staff to discuss the ambivalences that are created by the symbiosis of Colonial Williamsburg's two sides. The Disneyland metaphor captures these ambivalences. On the one hand, Colonial Williamsburg staff are attracted to the Disney corporation for its skill in constructing total cultural environments and for efficiently (and profitably) moving masses of people through them. On the other hand, they are repelled by what they see as Disney's crass commercialism—entertainment with no redeeming educational value.

Colonial Williamsburg staff believe that "sound business practices" are necessary to the accomplishment of the museum's educational mission. They also believe that education without entertainment is unpalatable to the mass public and that such a product cannot be sold in the cultural marketplace. The problem for them is thus to find a balance between education and entertainment that will be sufficiently appealing to attract crowds without degenerating into the pure commercialism of Disneyland. Each side, business and education, worries that the institution will be swayed too heavily by the other side's values. Thus, for example, the Young Turks saw the entrenched values of business culture as a major obstacle to their attempts to renew Colonial Williamsburg's history.

As we pursued our research, we learned that the

Foundation's historians and curators saw resistance to their agenda emanating from the "front line" as well as from the business side. Here it is worth noting that front-line "interpreters"— "guides," "host[esse]s" or "docents" in an older terminology—constitute a crucial audience in the process of museum education.[2] At a large institution like Colonial Williamsburg, there is an elaborate process for the training of this personnel. In this process, top management formulates the museum's overall educational and historiographical goals, staff historians and curators conduct the research and write the histories which will underpin the museum's public programming, and a staff of trainers and middle-level managers translates this research into stories and routines that front-line personnel can in turn use to teach the visiting public. As a consequence of this structure of historical production, a great deal of bureaucratic effort goes into controlling what the front line says, that is, into making sure that the officially sanctioned stories, and not others, are told to visitors. But the task is in a sense impossible, for inevitably stories change as they pass through the museum's multilayered organization. Employees at various administrative levels, and especially on the front line, may reinterpret, or even resist and subvert, the stories their superiors assign them to tell.

From the start of our research, our interactions with our historian-patrons differed in quality from our interactions with other museum natives, whether front-line interpreters or business-side managers. With professional historians we seemed to share an intellectual outlook and values. Like anthropologists drinking gin and tonics on the colonial officer's verandah, when we went to dinner with the historians we had conversations with them rather than interviews. And although we spent hours speculating on their professional motives, we rarely subjected them to quite the same anthropological technology that we turned, microphone in hand, on both the front-line workforce and the business-side managers.

Initially, our research focused on how Colonial Williamsburg was constructing the past. As we repeatedly toured the museum, we became intrigued by the disjointed, almost surreal quality of the stories that interpreters told visitors about the past. Despite officially sanctioned themes and storylines, guides' spiels never seemed to add up to a coherent narrative. Nevertheless, as we tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the fragmented language of museum-speak, we recognized two master narratives which underpinned the jumbled facts that formed the substance of most tours. We called these the narrative of nostalgia

and the narrative of progress, which we took to be historiographical analogues of anthropological constructions of the primitive.
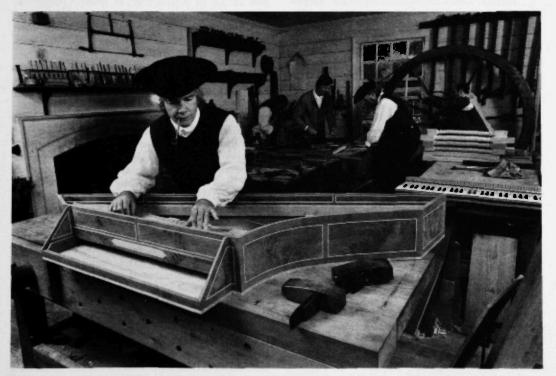
At this point in our research, we wondered to what degree museum employees were aware of these underlying master narratives. What we observed was staff members repeatedly turning the tables on visitors, substituting one narrative for the other. In other words, visitors who desired a bucolic Colonial Williamsburg would be pointedly told of the squalor of the past; and, on the other hand, visitors convinced of the superiority of the contemporary world would be "educated" about the cultural and even technological sophistication of "the world we have lost." As we saw it, in this pedagogic game the underlying narratives rarely became a topic of overt discussion between visitors and museum staff. Rather, staff members typically threw out—as historical "ammunition"—seemingly fragmentary and isolated "facts" which they thought had the power to destroy preconceptions. The resulting discourse was a surreal pastiche rather than a sustained discussion.

An example of this surreal discourse was vignettes about what we called "the invisible land-scape." A tour guide would point to the lovely shade trees that dotted the Historic Area, and then explain that they would "not have been there" in the colonial period. Sometimes guides would add that these trees had been planted in the 1930s by landscape architects under the sway of an overly bucolic Colonial Revival sensibility. But most of the time, guides would simply point out the beautiful trees and then take them away: "as you walk along the street, you have to pretend that these trees aren't here."

During this early stage in our research, we were interviewed at length by a regional Associated Press reporter. The resulting article was titled "U. Va. scientists examine quirky Williamsburg tours." It was carried in different versions by several Virginia newspapers, and it focused on the questions we were raising about the provenance of apparently insignificant details in Colonial Williamsburg interpretations:

Quaint pieces of history weaved [sic] into tours at Colonial Williamsburg are being examined by anthropologists searching for a better understanding of American culture.

1. Official colonial Williamsburg photograph of Foundation employees dressed as colonial natives. (photo: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia)

The University of Virginia scientists are looking for significance in such things as why interpreters at the re-created 18th century village emphasize the number of trees on the grounds. Or, why interpreters dwell on dining habits of the colonists, and why the kitchens were separate from the houses.

Eric Gable is fascinated about why the interpreters call attention to the fact that the original village had fewer trees than the re-creation.

"Why is this little nugget of history considered so important?" Gable said. "Why is there this obsession with trees in all the tours?". . .

"What is interesting is that these little peculiar facts become more significant to the visitor, rather than what a historian believes is important," he said. . . .

Handler and Gable said their research is less concerned with how accurately history is portrayed by Colonial Williamsburg as it is with why events or customs of the time are portrayed the way they are.

Close attention to detail is a hallmark of Colonial Williamsburg, said Richard Rotina, a historian at Old Dominion University.

Handler said a history book offers an interpretation of history from one or two authors, but Colonial Williamsburg interprets history through a sophisticated corporate structure. The process includes corporate administrators, historians, educators, front-line story-tellers, and the audience, Handler said.

Cary Carson, vice president for research at Colonial Williamsburg, described how the process works.

"It's a bit like the old parlor game when one person whispers into the ear of another who in turn whispers the same message to another and so on until it gets back to the original person who is surprised at the subtle changes in the message as it passed through the people," Carson said.

"When one of our historians happens by a tour, they are often surprised by the subtle changes in emphasis—not any inaccuracies or something we would take issue with, but an alteration of emphasis," he said. (Page 1990)

It is easy to see why our friends on the front line were angered by this article. In the first place, with its mention of "quaint pieces of history," "historical peculiarities" and "quirkly little artifacts of history," it seemed to trivialize their work. Secondly, the article opposed front-line employees to "historians," "anthropologists," "University of Virginia scientists," and corporate managers. It seemed to blame the front line for garbling and trivializing

the stories that the museum's professional staff intended to tell, thereby turning a coherent history into a jumble of "quirky" (albeit "accurate") facts.

The reporter's depiction of authoritative experts questioning interpreters' use of facts seemed to the latter to be a direct attack on their credibility and reputation. Not surprisingly, the front line felt we had betrayed their trust, We, in turn, felt we had betrayed our informants, but not simply by questioning aspects of their work in the larger project of Colonial Williamsburg's construction of history. More importantly, we realized that our critical appraisal of the institutional representation of history had all too easily been incorporated into a vice president's mildly paternalistic critique of the inevitable ineptitude of the corporation's front-line employees. In other words, our innocently offered critique of representational content had become ammunition in an ongoing reconfirmation of a managerial sensibility. The episode thus made us think, with a pained reflexivity, about the politics of our field site. We began to realize, as any anthropologist working today should have known, that an interpretation of the symbolism of power is also an enactment of power. We learned that it was not possible for us to comment, as neutral observers, on Colonial Williamsburg's history—that our interpretations would have political consequences (however trivial, as in this case) within the very "field" to which they referred.

At Colonial Williamsburg, we were initially fascinated by an explicit war of cultural representations, as the Young Turks struggled to make a Republican Disneyland into a democratic dismalland. But we lost sight of the simple fact that dissimilar ideologies could be implemented by the same institutional structure: ultimately, neither conservatives nor liberals among the corporate vice presidents were interested in challenging existing lines of authority in the museum hierarchy. At Colonial Williamsburg, an enlightened management never quite succeeds in its goals because (so it seems) its employees and the public (both of whom are the natives, as it were) aren't quite up to the task. As a result, management tends to do two things. On the one hand, despite a professed populism and commitment to egalitarian principles, it accepts, or allows to continue, a hierarchical and compartmentalized corporate structure which puts distance between "professional historians" and the "front line." On the other hand, it uses this distance to abdicate responsibility for what the front line does. Here, in short, we have a colonial situation, a colonial mentality, re-created in museum practice.

To point out the parallels between a museum

and its managers and a colony and its administrators is obviously to criticize museums in the hope that they might reflect on that which they take for granted. In an earlier era, when anthropologists ignored the realities of colonial authority their work not only lost the power to critique that authority, but became potentially available for authoritarian uses. It's not surprising that the same applies to a "repatriated" cultural critique which focuses too exclusively on museum representations of colonialism, or on colonialist representations of the other, while overlooking the institutional processes which produce those representations. Until we transcend this version of a repatriated anthropology we will be fighting a proxy war, avoiding a critique of our own participation in institutional power relations even as we help to reproduce them.   ❖

Notes

1. See, for example, Ames 1986, Benson et al. 1986, Blatti 1987, Clifford 1988, Duncan and Wallach 1978, Fane et al. 1991, Fisher 1991, Handsman and Leone 1989, Karp et al. 1992, Karp and Lavine 1991, Leone 1981, Pearce 1990, Stocking 1985, and Vergo 1989.
2. More attention needs to be paid to the distinction between what we might call the museum's internal audience (that is, its front-line interpreters) and its external audience (the visiting public). Interpreters constitute an audience in the sense that they receive the museum's message in training sessions which are designed to enable them to pass that message along to the public. But, in studying audience or visitor response, museum researchers tend to overlook this crucial internal audience, focusing solely on visitors. Interpreters thus become a kind of invisible audience; they are discussed in the literature on "training," but not in studies devoted to audience response. See Gable and Handler 1994b.

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