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After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site

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After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site

AN ENDURING IMAGE OF modernist anxiety is that the world we inhabit is no longer authentic—that it has become fake, plastic, a kitschy imitation. Anxiety, so the common wisdom has it, goes hand in hand with desire. We may have lost authenticity, but we want to find it again, and will pay what it costs (within reason) to get it. This image of “authenticity lost” has also been at the center of much “countermodern” cultural critique, and it has given anthropology a kind of romantic aura—a longing for a lost authenticity. Thus it often seems that the scholarly study of late modern or post-modern culture is a study of a reverse alchemy. What was once golden is now plastic.

Lately cultural critics claim to have shed their romanticism. Countermodern romanticism is no longer an unacknowledged scholarly motive, but an object of study, even an object of derision.¹ However, as several scholars have noted, most recently Edward Bruner in an article appearing in this journal (1994), it often seems that cultural critics do not go beyond the assertion that the world is empty, that outward appearances are facades, that everything is somehow constructed. In part, this is because one standard assumption among such critics is that those in power benefit from the prevailing definition of the authentic. They need the authority of authenticity to legitimate their power. Moreover, many of the critics assume that the public at large, the more or less disenfranchised masses of consumers, are co-opted into buying, say, a pedigree or an experience to make up for what they have been taught is the emptiness of their daily lives. The critic’s dream is that once already anxious natives are exposed to the

constructedness of authenticity, they will stop buying it. As a result, much of current cultural criticism involves exposing the authentic as construction. If the real past is revealed to be a present-day invention, if the natural fact is revealed to be a cultural convention, then the ruling order will topple and the masses will be freed from the yoke of anxious desire.

Museums—and especially heritage museums—play a peculiar role in all of this, for they are perfect topoi upon which to enact such critiques, even as they are also outgrowths of precisely the kind of countermodern anxiety that is the enduring basis for cultural critique.² Heritage is one form of cultural salvage. A “lost world” or a world about to be lost is in need of “preservation,” and the museum or heritage site bills itself as the best institution to perform this function. Heritage museums become publicly recognized repositories of the physical remains and, in some senses, the “auras” of the really “real.” As such, they are arbiters of a marketable authenticity. They are also objective manifestations of cultural, ethnic, or national identity, which outside the museum is often perceived as threatened by collapse and decay. Yet preservation entails artful fakery. Reconstruction, as it were, is the best evidence for the validity of a constructivist paradigm. Critics of this or that version of authenticity have before them in a heritage site ample evidence from which to build their deconstructive arguments.

In this essay, we would like to explore what happens to a heritage site “after authenticity”—where the pursuit of an elusive authenticity remains a goal even as it generates public statements intended to call into question the epistemology of authenticity.³ Colonial Williamsburg—a place that fashions itself as one of the most ambitious and extensive reconstruction projects ever undertaken—intends to be experienced as an objective correlate of an American national “identity.”

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Because Colonial Williamsburg makes such claims for itself, it has throughout its history also been subject to critiques of its authenticity by those who wish to undermine its authority to speak as the voice of an all-encompassing America. Moreover, in the past 20 years, the professional historians who ostensibly set the pedagogic agenda at Colonial Williamsburg have become increasingly articulate on-site critics of the epistemological underpinnings of authenticity as they promulgate, at this particular site, a historiography currently popular in history museums at large and in the academy.

The question that frames our essay is, What happens to authenticity when the public are both openly skeptical about the capacity of the powers that be at Colonial Williamsburg to make definitive judgments about authenticity and also openly skeptical about authenticity itself as a foundational value? We will argue that the vernacular concept of authenticity changes very little, that it shows a remarkable resilience, in a sense, because it is under threat. This is because one crucial way that Colonial Williamsburg maintains its authority is by selective or managed admissions of failure to discern what is fact, fancy, real, or fake. This attention to the management of impressions allows for the dream of authenticity to remain viable even in an environment in which all available empirical evidence could easily be perceived as supporting constructivist paradigms or alternatively as undermining authenticity-based claims to truth or value. When constructivist paradigms flourish, as they currently do at sites such as Colonial Williamsburg, they do so not in the service of a critique of the status quo but in defense (to borrow from Durkheim) of what come to be perceived as socially “necessary illusions.” While we draw our examples from research we carried out at Colonial Williamsburg from 1990 to 1993, the arguments are applicable to heritage sites in general and ultimately to the way constructivist paradigms are deflected or domesticated in the American vernacular in the “post-authentic” age.⁴

Colonial Williamsburg: The Ethnographic Setting

Colonial Williamsburg’s central district, the Historic Area, which covers 173 acres and includes over 500 buildings, is an inherently ambiguous object of authenticity. Of this collection of buildings, 88 are said to be original and the rest are advertised as reconstructions. These buildings range in size from large public buildings, such as the Governor’s Palace and the Capitol, to the dozens of outbuildings dotting the backyards of the stores and residences of the museum-city’s

streets. Outside the Historic Area are three major museums (devoted to folk art, decorative arts, and archaeology) and a James River plantation called Carter’s Grove. The museum was founded in 1926 with the backing of John D. Rockefeller Jr. and is today owned and operated by the nonprofit Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The foundation has a for-profit subsidiary, Colonial Williamsburg Hotel Properties, Inc., which operates several hotels and restaurants, with the profits used to support the museum. The foundation employs well over 3,000 people, and about a million people visit it each year. It had an annual budget of close to \$130 million and an endowment of close to \$200 million in 1989 (Colonial Williamsburg 1989:21–27).

The history that Colonial Williamsburg teaches has changed over the decades. In the past two decades, a crucial shift has occurred. The museum’s patriotic, celebratory story of the American founding has been challenged by a new generation of historians hired at Colonial Williamsburg beginning in the late 1970s. These historians were profoundly influenced by the “new social history” that had developed in academic history departments in response to the social turmoil of the 1960s. When they came to Colonial Williamsburg, they wanted to revive what they saw as a moribund cultural institution by making it tell a new story, one that included the total colonial community. In other words, to the story of the colonial elites, which the museum had always told, the new historians wanted to add stories about the masses, the middle classes, the tradesmen, the lower classes, and, crucially, the African American slaves. They wanted to depict the total social life of the community in order to emphasize inequality, oppression, and exploitation. The new story of the American Revolution was to be one of complicated social, political, and economic motivations and relationships, not simply a glorious triumph of democratic principles.

Moreover, the new historians at Colonial Williamsburg were explicitly constructivists. Not only did they wish to replace a patriotic history with one that was more critical, they wanted to teach the public that history making itself was not simply a matter of facts and truth. It was, instead, a process shot through with hidden cultural assumptions and ideological agendas. Indeed, when we began our research at Colonial Williamsburg, we were particularly interested in the ways that constructivist theory operated and how it fared in the face of an entrenched objectivist historiography that celebrated the authenticity of the site and the truth of the history it embodied. As we shall see, the relationship of authenticity to credibility speaks to a kind of compromise between constructivism and objectivism, a compromise that allows business to continue as usual at mainstream institutions such as Colonial Wil-

Williamsburg—an institution on the cutting edge of the way heritage is packaged and produced and at the same time typical.

Authenticity, Credibility, and the Tourist Market

Despite the fact that Colonial Williamsburg's historians espouse a constructivist epistemology, the daily discourse that one hears on the site stresses the museum's commitment to total authenticity, that is, to historical truth in every detail.⁵ To understand why the institution is willing to live with this contradiction, we need to examine how Colonial Williamsburg tries to position itself in the tourist marketplace. Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, Disneyland is a dominant presence, both symbolically and literally, in that market (Kratz and Karp 1993). One of the first things that staff members told us when we began our field study is that Colonial Williamsburg "isn't some historical Disneyland." Instead, they asserted, it was a "serious educational institution." Colonial Williamsburg differs from Disneyland, in the view of the museum's staff, because it presents "the real past" rather than one that is made up. It strives for historical accuracy. In so doing, it is constrained by "documented facts" and by historiographical methods of interpretation and presentation. By contrast, theme parks like Disneyland can make up whatever imaginary past, present, or future they wish, since they purvey amusement and fantasy, not education and history. In sum, Colonial Williamsburg is real, while Disneyland is fake.

Interestingly, the Disney corporation accepts this division of the labor of cultural representation. Late in 1993, Disney announced plans to build an American history theme park in northern Virginia. Though Colonial Williamsburg's administrators must have been worried by the possibility of head-to-head competition with Disney, they put on a brave face, as the headlines in local newspapers announced, "Williamsburg hopes Disney park will draw interest to the real thing." Moreover, that Disney was clearly distinguished from "the real thing" was taken as a given throughout the "history-based tourism industry." As a spokesperson for Monticello, the "historic house" of Thomas Jefferson, put it, "It will be interesting for people to get the Disney experience and then . . . to come here and get the real thing." Disney executives, too, spoke the same language, at least to the press: "Colonial Williamsburg has the same thing the Smithsonian and the Manassas battlefield have: real history. We can do everything we want, but we can't create that."⁶

Despite the fact that the Disney corporation publicly accepts the "reality" of the historical presentations

at Colonial Williamsburg, the museum's critics often do not. An example of their critique appeared recently in the *New York Review of Books*, in the form of an attack on contemporary architecture by critic Ada Louise Huxtable. Huxtable's essay opened with a tirade against Colonial Williamsburg, which she saw as "predating and preparing the way for the new world order of Disney Enterprises," an order that systematically fosters "the replacement of reality with selective fantasy." According to Huxtable, Colonial Williamsburg "has perverted the way we think," for it has taught Americans

to prefer—and believe in—a sanitized and selective version of the past, to deny the diversity and eloquence of change and continuity, to ignore the actual deposits of history and humanity that make our cities vehicles of a special kind of art and experience, the gritty accumulations of the best and worst we have produced. This record has the wonder and distinction of being the real thing. [Huxtable 1992:24–25]

These remarks epitomize an enduring critique of Colonial Williamsburg. Many of the museum's critics have said that it is literally too clean—that it does not include the filth and stench that would have been commonplace in an 18th-century colonial town. Many of these critics also find that Colonial Williamsburg is metaphorically too clean; it avoids historical unpleasantness like slavery, disease, and class oppression in favor of a rosy picture of an elegant, harmonious past.⁷ This, of course, is exactly what similarly positioned critics say of Disneyland. Indeed, from the perspective of the people who take this critical stance, Colonial Williamsburg is all too much like Disneyland. Both produce the kinds of tidy, oversanitized products they do because they are big, middle-of-the-road "corporate worlds" who sell entertainment rather than education.

Credibility Armor

Colonial Williamsburg has suffered the too-clean critique almost from the moment of its founding (Kopper 1986:165). That critique—which labels Colonial Williamsburg a fake like Disneyland instead of an authentic historic site—strikes at the museum's very conception of itself. Indeed, because authenticity is what Colonial Williamsburg sells to its public, the institution's claims to authenticity become a point of vulnerability. This is especially true for the foundation's professional intelligentsia—its historians, curators, and the like—for they are in many respects the peers of Huxtable and the others who snipe at them from the ivory tower. But the too-clean critique extends to the public at large, and so a defense against this critique becomes the business of the institution as a whole, especially on the "front line" where interpreters meet the public.

Every day hundreds of people visit Colonial Williamsburg, an institution whose mission is to show the public what colonial Virginia “was really like.” Foundation staff know that in every crowd there are individuals casting a cold and critical eye on the museum’s claim to present that reality. In these circumstances, Colonial Williamsburg staff work hard not only to present an authentic site but to maintain the institution’s reputation for authenticity. Moreover, maintaining an image of authenticity means protecting Colonial Williamsburg’s chosen institutional identity—that of a serious history museum, not a theme park. As one interpreter put it, “It is important to discuss facts because each facility wants to be accurate and to present to our customers and visitors the best historical interpretation possible and to retain its authentic reputation” (see Bruner 1994:401).⁸

“Reputation” is something that pertains to the self or to the institution as a corporate personality, yet it is made and maintained vis-à-vis others. As Colonial Williamsburg staff see it, the museum’s reputation for authenticity is on the line every day, and every one of the myriad historical details it exhibits is both a witness to institutional authenticity and a window of vulnerability. When we asked a manager who was working on increasing the accuracy of the museum’s costumes to explain the “educational payoff” of attention to historical detail, he responded by talking about reputation rather than pedagogy:

The clothing is just as important as creating an accurate interior, creating any sort of accuracy. Any time you have a break in your credibility, then everything that is credible is lost, or it’s called into question. If you have someone who comes in, and they happen to see plastic buttons, or someone wearing obvious knee socks, instead of proper hosiery, then to me that’s saying, well, that’s not accurate. I wonder if the way that tea service is laid out is accurate? I wonder if the fact that that garden’s laid out the way it is, I wonder if that’s accurate? You start to lose it. That’s why it’s so important that our interpreters have the ability to take things that are less than accurate and get people to start thinking beyond them. And catching people, anticipating problems of credibility. Now if we can catch them up, by using better tools, better floor arrangements, better costumes, better gardens, then that’s one less chink in our credibility armor that we have to worry about.

Colonial Williamsburg defends its credibility every day on the streets of the reconstructed capital, but its defenses are not perfect. Mistakes happen, visitors complain. In Colonial Williamsburg’s corporate archives is a revealing record of how such complaints are resolved—files containing letters from disappointed visitors, along with the foundation’s responses to them. These files record an ongoing effort to put the best spin

it can on these criticisms by invoking Colonial Williamsburg’s unwavering fidelity to authenticity.

For example, an elderly couple wrote that their most recent visit had turned into “a long disappointing day” because they “found many things that did not fit the Williamsburg we’ve known over the past 20 years.” They complained that the “lovingly truly preserved past of our America” was being marred by the presence of employees with nail polish, plastic earrings, and tennis shoes. Charles Longworth, president of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, replied:

You brought a sharp eye with you on your recent visit to Colonial Williamsburg. You caught a few of our interpretive staff with their authenticity and courtesy down. You may be sure that each of the violations you cite of courtesy standards and 18th-century apparel and appearance is being addressed by the supervisors of the violators. Your standards are ours, and we strive to see them honored by all employees. Being human, we sometimes fail, but our efforts to achieve authenticity and friendliness have been and will continue to be unflagging.⁹

Phrases such as “reputation” and “credibility armor,” and the image of being caught with one’s authenticity (pants?) down, suggest the pervasive insecurity that, apparently, accompanies Colonial Williamsburg’s claims to possess the really real. Even the foundation’s professional historians, who espouse a relativistic or constructivist philosophy of history, experience this embattled concern for reputation.¹⁰ An architectural historian, for example, told us what he characterized as a humorous story about an encounter he had with a visitor early in his career at Williamsburg. The visitor came up to him and said that Colonial Williamsburg did not have a single padlock on the reconstructed buildings that was genuinely 18th-century in design. In response to this criticism, the historian spent a day tracking down all the information he could find on the locks in the reconstruction. Then he went to a museum famous for its collection of early American artifacts “to study the 24 or so 18th-century padlocks they had.” He made drawings of those. Next, he told us, he “developed a rough typology—I think there were four recognizable styles of padlock, and the visitor was right, none of ours were like these.” As a result, the historian wrote the visitor thanking him and promising that while Colonial Williamsburg could not afford to change all the old locks, “on every subsequent project” they would make more faithful reproductions.

The historian prefaced his humorous story by explaining that he and his colleagues sweat the details so that “you aren’t a joke” in the eyes of the public. His humorous portrayal of himself as an insecure ferret let loose on the problem of padlocks—because veracity in every detail is Colonial Williamsburg’s hallmark and because he doesn’t want to be a joke—reflects an abid-

ing institutional concern, for the visitor who points out flaws in the mimetic portrait of the past Colonial Williamsburg professes to create is a stock character in many stories employees tell about their encounters with the visitors. He is, as one supervisor of frontline interpreters told us, like “a magpie” that weaves odd trinkets—tinfoil, some colored yarn—into its nest. A human magpie at places such as Colonial Williamsburg is someone who collects, indeed is obsessed with, a certain category of obscure historical facts.

Frontline employees are, if anything, more sensitive to the threat of the magpie than are backstage personnel like research historians. To these employees at Colonial Williamsburg, the magpie is an embarrassing nuisance who may be hiding among every flock of tourists, threatening to reveal the guide’s ignorance (and knock the guide off his or her storyline) with a pointed query about some object or some theme about which the guide will have no clue.

Magpies threaten individual reputations during brief encounters at particular sites, and they also threaten institutional reputations. When the architectural historian says that it is a point of honor that Colonial Williamsburg get the details right, it is in part to protect his reputation, but also to protect the institution’s reputation. Veracity, authenticity, or getting the facts right is a deep value at Colonial Williamsburg and it has a double quality. People like the architectural historian sweat the details, in part, because they too are like magpies. The architectural historian used to tell us how he loved the detective work involved in tracking down just such stray facts. But he and his colleagues also get the facts right so that they won’t be exposed as a joke in public. The institution rewards employees for responding to the magpie’s trivial or tangential queries because this keeps the credibility armor nicely burished.

Constructivist Ploys in Defense of Objectivist Authenticity

Credibility armor is important because those who work at Colonial Williamsburg assume (and often have such assumptions confirmed) that the public is concerned with authenticity.¹¹ Every claim to possess or represent the “real” at least implies a claim to possess or represent the knowledge and authority to decide what’s real and what isn’t. Furthermore, Colonial Williamsburg employees expect that a significant number of their public are always somewhat skeptical of such claims to authority, especially those made on behalf of large corporate institutions like Colonial Williamsburg. As one of the foundation’s historians put it, during a

workshop we led concerning historical relativism and African American history,

I think there are a lot of interpreters who share with many of our visitors this suspicion, that, in fact, there are official histories, and that this institution has been in the past, and may still be . . . either consciously or unconsciously purveying an official history. Which is simply to say, a history that somebody knows to be wrong, but has good reasons for wanting to promote anyway, either because if we tell the real story we’ll turn off visitors, or we’ll open up questions of racial antipathy which a well-behaved place—which Americans, good citizens—don’t want to [hear]. . . . So there are lots of reasons why an institution like ours—particularly a slick institution like ours—is likely to have a hidden agenda. Which is only to say that there are probably lots and lots of people who don’t know they’re relativists, but fear that history is something that is concocted.¹²

People, in sum, are oftentimes predisposed to think (unkindly) of Colonial Williamsburg as a “slick institution” manufacturing facades and cover-ups rather than the authentic truth. Faced with such skepticism, and with the more sophisticated critiques of the intelligentsia, Colonial Williamsburg routinely deploys what might be called a proactive attitude, trying to defuse criticisms by anticipating them. Sometimes this takes the form of teaching visitors about “mistakes” the foundation has made in its depiction of the past. For example, on one tour that we took, the interpreter explained that in an earlier era in the museum’s history all the clapboard outbuildings had been kept freshly painted and the woodwork had been of the highest quality. At that time, she explained, “We assumed that every building on the property would be as neat as every other.” But now, she continued, researchers know better: “Only the front’s important, that’s your first impression, so buildings out back are going to be rougher.” As a result, outbuildings were being painted less frequently and allowed to wear unevenly. Thus, as we looked at the crisp, white clapboard in front of us, we were asked to imagine more shabbily painted outbuildings elsewhere.

Another proactive ploy is to point out the purposeful artifice of the museum-city, a place meant to recreate an 18th-century reality but one that also, of necessity, must negotiate 20th-century realities. For example, many buildings in the Historic Area are used either as office space or as residences for foundation employees. In such cases, 20th-century elements must be “disguised.” “The rules say you can’t show anything 20th-century,” one interpreter explained. “No anachronisms! That means no television antennas . . . no Christmas lights.” Other interpreters told us that garages were made to look like stables, central air-conditioning was allowed because it did not have to be visible, and garbage cans could be hidden behind hedges. When we came across these artfully disguised elements, they

were duly pointed out to us. As we paused, on one occasion, to marvel at 200-year-old boxwoods, we were reminded that “we also have wonderful things like fire hydrants, trash cans, and soda machines that we try to hide.” As we continued our stroll beneath some tall trees, our guide added that “if you look up in trees this time of year you see things that look like an upside-down bucket, and it’s a light. You don’t find them in the summer because of the leaves.”

A third ploy for parrying criticisms entails blaming the visitors for inauthenticities. The best example of this ploy concerns trees (cf. Bruner 1994:402; Gable and Handler 1993a). The streets of the Historic Area are shaded by tall and stately oaks and other deciduous trees. Inevitably, interpreters would call our attention to these beautiful and obviously old trees and remark that they would not have been there in the colonial era. They would go on to explain that the foundation would never cut down those trees because, despite its commitment to authenticity, it had also to consider visitor comfort. Without the shady trees, the streets in summer (“when most of our visitors come”) would be unbearable. In pointing to the trees, our guide on one occasion enjoined us to “keep in mind that many changes have been made to the town itself, things we have done to make it basically more comfortable for . . . 20th-century people.” As on many tours, he advised us to look past or through these anachronisms in order to imagine the real past. It was as if the foundation was trying to shape the visitor’s appreciation of the landscape in such a way as to confirm that, yes, the town is artificial, but Colonial Williamsburg could not be as accurate as it wished to be because the visitors’ needs precluded it.

These rhetorical tactics might be seen as a kind of “impression management”—constructivism deployed in the defense of objectivism. Interpreters point out repeatedly (and indeed they are trained to do so) that history changes constantly, that what is believed to be true at one moment is discovered to be inauthentic later on, and that the business of history making involves all sorts of compromises. Yet these constructivist confessions, as it were, stem ultimately from a concern for maintaining Colonial Williamsburg’s reputation as an arbiter of authenticity. Constructivist caveats shore up the assertion that the foundation aims for authenticity in every detail. As we discovered in interviews with visitors, its public by and large expects that, but some are also inclined to doubt the museum’s honesty. Cognizant of that doubt, the museum repeatedly highlights not only the authenticity of its exhibits but the details that fall short of total authenticity. Employed to manage impressions, these admissions of small errors are expected to bolster the public’s faith that the institution is diligently working toward its larger goal: to re-create

the past in its totality, that is, with complete authenticity.

But Colonial Williamsburg recognizes that there are some elements of its public for whom authenticity—if authenticity is defined as fidelity to objective truth—is anathema. In interviewing them, we occasionally encountered such visitors. An elderly widow stands out, perhaps because she was among the first visitors we talked to. She had been coming to Colonial Williamsburg for over 30 years and always stayed in the Williamsburg Inn, a five-star hotel famous for its slightly rusticated elegance. Explaining to us that she was one of the foundation’s regular donors (we never asked her how much she was accustomed to giving), she admitted that she was somewhat chagrined by the “recent,” as she put it, preoccupation with refashioning the town as it “really was.” Christmas, she told us, was her favorite time to visit, precisely because of the “festive decorations,” although, she emphasized, they were not true to the 18th century. Would Williamsburg do away with these anachronisms? she worried aloud.

For the widow, the recent move toward greater truth was threatening to ruin what lay at the heart of Williamsburg’s appeal. It was a place, she reminded us, where she, an old woman, could still stroll the streets at night. She explained Colonial Williamsburg’s appeal by way of a vignette having to do with an early stay at the inn. She had been eating in the luxurious dining room and, desiring sugar for her coffee, was about to dip her spoon into a large pewter cup in front of her when a liveried black waiter quickly bent over, moved the cup, and spooned sugar from a smaller container into her coffee. The first container, she elaborated, was salt. Apparently, in colonial times, she added, they served salt in what today might look like a sugar bowl. But it wasn’t the inn’s attention to that little piece of authenticity that she wanted us to see through her eyes. Rather, it was the black waiter’s silent skill. Ever attentive, waiting unobtrusively but alertly in the background, he’d anticipated her faux pas and resolved her problem without calling attention to her mistake. Skilled waiters like that, she emphasized, could not be reproduced, or faked, or trained. They embodied for her the essence of what Colonial Williamsburg used to stand for before “that new word, ‘authenticity,’” had become such a concern.

Visitors such as the widow are not significant characters in the imaginary public Colonial Williamsburg employees created and re-created in daily conversations.¹³ Nevertheless, it is entirely plausible that people such as the widow played a larger (if not explicitly recognized) role in the way Williamsburg’s higher-ups imagined their *donating* public—a close to 50,000-strong subgroup that Colonial Williamsburg was in-

creasingly relying on for the gifts and grants that would enable the museum to preserve itself.

To this public, the powers that be at Colonial Williamsburg employed what could be characterized as a constructivist historiography, but in the service of the status quo, as celebration, not critique. Consider President Longworth's annual report for the years 1980 and 1981—a report that introduces Colonial Williamsburg's donating public to the new social history and reassures them that old celebratory history will not be erased as a result.

Longworth's report is in the form of a history of shifts in the major ideas—couched as consumer preferences—that guided the foundation. In short, it is a constructivist history. It begins with the aesthetic motives of the customers—"visitors came here . . . to see buildings and furnishings." Later, in "the days of the cold war . . . interpretation was fired by a sense of duty to inspire and encourage patriotism, to imbue visitors with a perception of the preciousness and fragility of personal freedom." In Longworth's historical sketch, the new social history "reflected the dominant characteristics of the 1960s: suspicion and distrust of leaders and a concomitantly populist view of the world" (1982:6–7).

Longworth notes that the new social history "inevitably caused a strong reaction from those whose commitment to the patriots as the source of inspiration was steadfast." And while he avers that it is "the tension of these differences of view that . . . creates a lively learning environment," the tenor of his report is to defend the patriots against the new social historians. He does so by embracing a constructivist historiography:

It would be easy and perhaps popular to embrace social history with passionate abandon and forsake the patriots, retaining their memory as symbolic of an outworn and naive view of America's past. But I know of no one who advocates such a course. One needs to retain always a cautious view of any claim of exclusive access to the true history. I believe one must accept the puzzlement, confusion, ambiguity, and uncertainty that characterizes scholarship—the search for truth. [1982:8]

Longworth recognizes that the "reasonable and dispassionate interpretation of evidence" is fogged by "some ideological base." But, given that history cannot escape ideology, Colonial Williamsburg should "maintain an ideological blend rather than develop a pure strain." Ultimately this ideological blend of the "dramatic, inspiring story that never loses its significance" and the new social history is good for Colonial Williamsburg as an institution. It is a strategy that guarantees survival, for it gives the public what it wants, or, at least, what Colonial Williamsburg has gotten them used to: "An organization such as this has by its longevity and its success created certain expectations. They may not be

blunted summarily by a generation of scholars or administrators who have discovered the new historiography" (Longworth 1982:8–9).

Because the foundation must cater to the desires of a market that it has, in a sense, created, Longworth concludes that "we shall . . . continue to do what we do." As proof he cites the 60 percent increase in the collections budget and the construction of the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery—meant to house a collection of colonial era "masterworks," which, according to the social historians' canons of authenticity, could no longer be displayed in the well-appointed homes of the reconstructed village because they were neither made nor used in Williamsburg itself (1982:9–10).

Longworth (who left the presidency in 1992, remaining at Colonial Williamsburg as chairman of the board) has consistently used constructivist rhetoric to promote the preservation of a certain patriotism linked to a certain aesthetic. In a preface to Philip Kopper's sumptuous coffee-table history of the site, he argues that Colonial Williamsburg makes myths "because of America's need for myth." "It is easy," he writes, "to dismiss Williamsburg as a purveyor of patriotism," but, he argues, "the stimulus provided by patriotic feeling will be a vital tonic to the body politic." He goes on to assert that Colonial Williamsburg "is constantly changing, as it stands its iconographic ground"—that "the recreation of our usable past" is a necessary social process. In concluding, he notes how the old idea

that Colonial Williamsburg would be "finished" rather than an ongoing enterprise of great vigor and complexity seems naive today. But, I suppose, it also seemed naive, or at least highly unlikely to many, that the dream of a new nation would ever be realized. So, out of our dreams we find reality and in myth our dreams are forged. [Longworth 1986:6–7]

Here Longworth invokes a "usable" past—a self-conscious, ongoing invention of history—in the twin service of national identity and corporate survival.

The Uses of Constructivism

In a challenging essay that recently appeared in this journal, Edward Bruner uses similar observations from his fieldwork at New Salem, Illinois—a site associated with Abraham Lincoln—to suggest that authenticity from the native point of view is evidence of a home-grown cultural constructivism. He shows that authenticity has several meanings for the staff and visitors at New Salem, one of which is "historical verisimilitude." As Bruner puts it, "*authentic* in this sense means credible and convincing, and this is the objective of most museum professionals, to produce a historic site believable to the public, to achieve mimetic credibility" (1994:399). "Some museum professionals go further,"

Bruner continues, and this entails a second native meaning of authenticity—to “speak as if the 1990s New Salem not only resembles the original but is a complete and immaculate simulation, one that is historically accurate and true to the 1830s” (1994:399). Bruner elaborates upon the distinction between the former and latter senses:

In the first meaning, based on verisimilitude, a 1990s person would walk into the village and say, “This looks like the 1830s,” as it would conform to what he or she expected the village to be. In the second meaning, based on genuineness, an 1830s person would say, “This looks like 1830s New Salem,” as the village would appear true in substance, or real. I found that museum professionals use *authenticity* primarily in the first sense, but sometimes in the second. [1994:399]

The important point for Bruner is that insiders at the site are well aware that what they are producing is not a perfect copy, but something that is credible to an audience. The implication is that the natives (and here Bruner is referring especially to the professional staff at New Salem) do not confuse the reproduction with the real. Instead, they are aware that what they are creating is “verisimilitude”—something that will convince an audience or be congenial to an audience’s sensibilities.

Bruner takes this a step further. Just as professionals are not preoccupied with recreating the real thing, so, too, are visitors to the site less concerned with this kind of absolute authenticity:

The tourists are seeking in New Salem a discourse that enables them to better reflect on their lives in the 1990s. New Salem and similar sites enact an ideology, recreate an origin myth, keep history alive, attach tourists to a mythical collective consciousness, and commodify the past. The particular pasts that tourists create/imagine at historic sites may never have existed. But historic sites like New Salem do provide visitors with the raw material . . . to construct a sense of identity, meaning, attachment, and stability. [1994:411]

Bruner concludes his essay by noting that “New Salem can be read in two different ways”—from a pessimistic view or an optimistic one. The pessimists see such sites “as exploitative, as strengthening the ruling classes, as deceit, as false consciousness, as manipulation of the imagination of already alienated beings.” Bruner counts himself among the optimists who focus on the ways the site offers “the utopian potential for transformation, offers hope for a better life, says people can take charge of their lives and change themselves and their culture.”¹⁴

According to Bruner, visitors and employees alike “take charge” of the way they consume and produce culture. He emphasizes that visitors and guides “bring their own interests and concerns to the interaction”

(1994:410). He describes these interactions as “playful,” as “improvisation.” The upshot, for Bruner, is that Americans “seeking . . . a discourse that enables them to better reflect on their lives in the 1990s” (1994:411) can and do find such a discourse at New Salem.

Having made these ethnographic observations, Bruner wishes to link native notions of authenticity to anthropological theories of culture. Bruner is a constructivist. He asserts that the production of authenticity-as-verisimilitude is no more or less than a clear manifestation of what culture everywhere and always is—an invention (in many instances based on an attempt at replication). As such it is a benign fact. It is benign, too, because it allows natives to play with an invented past and revivify certain enduring ideals relevant to their present and future.

What Bruner observed at New Salem and what we observed at Colonial Williamsburg are essentially the same phenomena. Yet we interpret them in almost opposite ways. Let us examine the ways our interpretations differ, and what this implies for theories of cultural production at (what some natives at least like to claim are) “shrines” to an American identity.

Perhaps most significantly, we have different attitudes toward our respective sites. If Bruner celebrates the native preoccupation with authenticity-as-verisimilitude as a benign sign of a universal human tendency to construct culture (and, in the American case, to be aware that they are doing so), then we criticize authenticity-as-impression-management as a symptom of an ongoing preoccupation in American culture with a certain kind of past. For us, it is bad enough that this kind of authenticity allows an airbrushed past to become exactly the kind of mythological standard middle-class Americans aspire to. What disturbs us just as much is that authenticity-as-impression-management is one of an array of practices (both intentional and unintentional) that effectively enervate constructivist insights at a place whose built environment is living proof, as it were, of the power of constructivist theory as a model for what history, as narrated or embodied or objectified memory, really is.

We, like Bruner, are constructivists. Along with Bruner, we would even go so far as to say that constructivist theory has been the bread and butter of most cultural anthropologists for a long time. For us, the pervasiveness of constructivist theory raises some ethnographic questions when an anthropologist studies American culture, particularly at sites such as New Salem and Colonial Williamsburg. The first question is whether constructivism is also a native theory in the sense that it is part of the commonsense baggage of people who are not professional anthropologists.¹⁵

When we began our research at Colonial Williamsburg, we were interested in the ways construc-

tivist theory operated on the ground. At first, it seemed to us that native discussions of authenticity-as-impression-management revealed commonsense understandings of constructivist theories of culture. But authenticity-as-impression-management turned out to have less to do with teaching about constructivist historiography than with protecting or shoring up a threatened reputation. To talk of verisimilitude as credibility armor, to sweat the details so you're not a joke in public in a reconstructed place that was "always changing because new facts are found," but that was nonetheless always being criticized by powerful outsiders for producing a bowdlerized past—this was, we decided, a tactic meant to protect the dream of authenticity as perfect copy.

As we have argued elsewhere (1994), Colonial Williamsburg is a shrine to a "naive objectivism." One of the ways that the priesthood of this shrine protects this cherished paradigm is by judicious legerdemain in the service of public relations. So, one way that we differ from Bruner is that we would argue that a Kuhnian paradigm shift has not occurred at Colonial Williamsburg. The site's authority—its reputation, if you will—depends on the public enactment of fidelity to an essentialist authenticity, not on constructivism.

This does not mean, however, that there are no spaces on Colonial Williamsburg's rhetorical terrain for native versions of constructivist notions as Bruner describes them. Ironically, just as the new social history began to make headway, advocates of the older, more celebratory history were able to use constructivist rhetoric against the new social history in order to repackage celebratory history and reassert its claims to ultimate authority. Longworth's defense of the status quo reminds us of what philosophers have occasionally pointed out (cf. Hiley 1988), but what we, in the midst of the "culture wars," perhaps overlook. You can be a constructivist and a conservative. Longworth does this in a speech we quoted above. If all is relative, then why not "continue to do what we do"—while, in effect, relabeling it?

This kind of constructivism has the added benefit of insulating the particular social actors (or institutions) from their own personal skepticism. Longworth does not have to personally believe in the authenticity of the reconstructed Williamsburg. Instead, he simply has to be convinced that myths, if they contain morally uplifting messages, are salutary. In this way, a conservative constructivism protects an obviously empirically false image of the past, because it is a "necessary illusion" of the same kind Durkheim, personally an atheist, posited for religion. We might add that in America, conservative constructivism has usually been tinged with a willful optimism. If we all believe, or "think positive" as one euphemism has it, then it will come

true. Or more cynically still, if we pretend to believe, or, in our role as leaders, if we ensure that "they," the herd, the mass, believe, then it will come true. It is this kind of constructivism that lends itself to conservatism in its political and cultural sense.

This, then, is a chief way that constructivist notions thrive at Colonial Williamsburg. Authorities such as President Longworth use constructivist arguments to justify supporting good myths over bad facts, or authenticity as a model for, rather than a model of, a reality. They do so, as often as not, in the name of consumer preference. They do so in order to protect what they take to be universal ideals and values, and, nowadays, they do so against the implied background of a society under siege—a society threatened by postmodern plague. When they lay claim to being the enlightened arbiters of universal values—servants and guides to the public—they import what to us are self-serving visions about how the world should look.

This is the reason why we are more pessimistic than Bruner about the ways Americans construct identities for themselves at shrines such as Colonial Williamsburg and New Salem. It is not that we are essentialists—that we see such sites as unreal or inauthentic. Rather, we are ultimately less sanguine than Bruner that what goes on there is a universal form of cultural construction. Natives exhibit what to us is a kind of divided consciousness. On the one hand, they continue to be preoccupied with the past as the last refuge of the really real. On the other hand, some of them, at least, allow for the possibility that the really real is myth. Yet, according to them, it is "myth" that, if institutions such as Colonial Williamsburg and the American nation itself are to survive and prosper, people must believe.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is the starting point for much of this literature (1969:217–251). Among many others, see Handler 1986; Orvell 1989; Spooner 1986; and Trilling 1971.

2. This literature grows out of work in a number of areas. On museums, see Karp and Lavine 1991; Pearce 1990; and Vergo 1989. On consumerism, see McCracken 1988 and Miller 1987. On the ethnography of markets and trade goods in a transnational world, see Appadurai 1986; Schildkrout 1992; and Thomas 1991.

3. We borrow the aptly ambivalent framing quality of "after" from the philosopher Gary Shapiro (1995) and from Clifford Geertz (1995).

4. Assisted by Anna Lawson, we carried out fieldwork at Colonial Williamsburg between January 1990 and August 1991. Our research was supported by grants from the Spencer Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Virginia. Published results of this re-

search include Gable and Handler 1993a, 1993b, and 1994, and Gable et al. 1992.

5. Carson 1981; Chappell 1989; and Colonial Williamsburg 1985.

6. *Daily Progress* 1993a, 1993b.

7. The critique of Colonial Williamsburg's sanitized history has been elaborated by Leone (1981), Van West and Hoffschwelle (1984), Wallace (1981), and Wells (1993), among others. For an analysis of dirt as a metaphor with respect to history museums, see Gable and Handler 1993b.

8. Quotations from Colonial Williamsburg staff are verbatim, taken from our field notes or, in most cases, from the transcriptions of tape-recorded interviews and tours.

9. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, file "Colonial Williamsburg Criticisms, 1987," letter dated February 20, response of President Longworth dated March 9.

10. On historical relativism and constructivism at Colonial Williamsburg and in American history museums in general, see Carson 1981, 1991; Chappell 1989; Gable et al. 1992; and Krugler 1991.

11. For a thoroughly researched study of the way Americans conceptualize authenticity and seek it out in tourism, see Cameron and Gatewood 1994.

12. The workshop in question was a preliminary presentation of material that was eventually published in Gable et al. 1992.

13. This public tended to be populated by history buffs (the magpies), by various versions of the rube from Toledo—the person who asks in all seriousness if the squirrels are mechanical—and by families with obnoxious children.

14. Bruner's optimism scans as a kind of faith in the consumer because, for Bruner, the very "popularity and frequency" of sites such as New Salem is a sign that they do something good for their publics (1994:411–412).

15. Given that we anthropologists have been spouting a constructivist line for so long, given that other disciplines also have made constructivist theories of culture central to what they teach about the human condition, given that people who work at or visit Colonial Williamsburg and New Salem are "educated," one would expect that such a theory has been incorporated into the commonsense views they bring to such sites. Moreover, given that we are natives, and that we don't manufacture our theories out of thin air but out of the cultural environment in which we live, we would hypothesize that constructivist theory has commonsense analogues.

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