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Research and writing

My training is in English Renaissance literature, but for the last twenty-five years, my work has been primarily focused on early modern exploration and travel.

What first captivated me about travel writing, as a graduate student, was its difference from literature. These were texts that simply didn't respond to the questions and reading strategies we had all learned to apply to literary texts. These narratives, as much as they were shaped by rhetoric and imagination, were even more strongly pressured by the accidents and exigencies of experience in the material world. I wanted to understand how such texts could be thought about productively, what questions they wanted to answer. While in some ways less engaging than a play by Shakespeare or a poem by Donne, these sources did have a few fairly intriguing properties: I was captivated by their quality of immediacy, and their contents kept surprising me.

The way in which writing by participant witnesses invites us to reconsider habits of thinking about the past has been an enduring preoccupation in my research. In my first book, *Voyages in Print*, I looked at the print narratives produced by a series of English enterprises in North America that led eventually to a lasting settlement at Jamestown. At that time, in the mid-1990s, these narratives had just begun to receive concentrated attention within literary studies; while the Columbian Quincentenary had a great deal to do with this on a larger scale, within the discipline I would credit a great deal of this interest to the influence of very exciting work on these early narratives by Stephen Greenblatt.

Voyages in Print was indebted in many ways to earlier work by Greenblatt and others for its methodology and ways of thinking about texts. But the argument of the book, in essence, was that the wrong story had been told — the English who explored and attempted to settle North America in the late 1500s and early 1600s did *not* succeed in exercising power over its peoples and geographies by dint of their facility with signs, words, and texts. Rather, the early decades of this colonial enterprise were marked by a series of failures, repeatedly recuperated by rhetoric as forms of success — that success, however, was on the printed page rather than in the lived experience of encounter.

Without a doubt, England eventually succeeded in settling North America with a population whose language and culture still dominate most of the United States and Canada; we look back to the early decades of the colonial encounter for narratives of origin and foundation, contributors to national identity. Shifting the story of those decades away from one of glorious (or nefarious) success doesn't obviate that possibility; indeed, as I wrote in that book's conclusion, attention to the copious

evidence "promises the making of other histories for the uses of the present" (VP 174). Just as the digital age has revived some of the participatory aspects of manuscript culture, lost in the age of print, if we look to the past as a source of identity, these lost possibilities may allow us to envision alternatives for the present and the future.

Interrogating the larger historical narratives from the perspective of primary sources led me to another set of interests and questions, about the processes, large and small, by which experience is transformed into narratives, which in turn are — through a variety of means — disseminated, reproduced, reconfigured, and transmitted to the present. How did we come to remember this part of the past in the ways we do? How was the matter of experience transformed (or not) into narrative in the first place? In my second book, *Remembering the Early Modern Voyage*, I approached this vast topic through three case studies; beginning with voyages from the 1570s-1620s, each chapter traced the resulting narratives over several centuries as they were produced, reproduced and reinterpreted. As evidence, I considered not only the documents but also evidence that might fall under the heading of "history of the book": the history of individual copies, of editions, of reading and archiving practises — in short, the relays of material media that have carried narratives forward across the intervening centuries.

In the case of early travel writing, however, paper evidence tells only part of the story. I've been haunted for years by the geographic mistake that blemished one early article on exploration by a colleague; as a graduate student more attuned to theory than territory, I could easily have made a similar error. So I've come to feel that it helps, whenever possible, to smell the air, see the sights, and put your foot on the ground in places the travel narratives mention.

Lecturing for the MIT Alumni Travel Program has taken me north to some fairly remote places in Hudson's Bay, Baffin Island, Labrador and Arctic Québec; and has connected me to people with a great deal of local knowledge — archaeologists, naturalists, pilots. A series of conferences in Toronto, St. John's, and Québec unveiled a larger network of people working on early modern contact in North America across an even wider variety of disciplines — fisheries history, geology, materials science, museum studies, bibliography, ethnography. The depth of these resources, along with a series of site visits over more than a decade, allowed me to write a final chapter that coupled analysis of the 17th century documentary record with evidence of archaeology and with current practices of representing and interpreting the period, through theater and public history.

Remembering the Voyage was originally part of a larger manuscript, on Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations of the English Nation* (1598-1600). As a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at the Huntington Library this year, I am working to complete that manuscript and find a publisher for it. •