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The Jamestown Commemoration of 2007: Remembering Our Diversity in the Past and Present

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“The Far East has its Mecca, Palestine its Jerusalem, France its Lourdes, and Italy its Loretto, but America’s only shrines are her altars of patriotism—the first and most potent being Jamestown; the sire of Virginia, and Virginia the mother of this great Republic…”

—from a 1907 Virginia guidebook (APVA 2000)

INTRODUCTION

The 400th anniversary of the initial settlement of Jamestown in 1607 provided an important opportunity for us to reflect on the recent public commemoration of this early English presence in the land that became the United States. While much has been written in both an academic and popular vein about Jamestown in the years surrounding the 400th anniversary (Horn 2006, Kelso 2006, Kupperman 2007, Rountree 2006, Woolley 2008), little has been written discussing the significance of the commemoration itself as a cultural phenomenon. To this end, this paper focuses on the more public aspects of the Jamestown Commemoration of 2007; and, in particular, it explores the significance of this commemoration in relation to our past and present diversity, a diversity that includes—and exceeds—red, black, and white.¹

Before addressing the Jamestown Commemoration directly, I want to comment on my own background as it contributes to an
understanding of my approach. Unlike those usually offering comment on Jamestown, I am neither an archaeologist of contact nor an historian of colonial America. Rather, I am a cultural anthropologist with an interest in these areas. I have a somewhat peculiar academic history in that my master’s research was on the archaeology and history of the contact period (Melomo 1994), and my doctoral research was on contemporary issues of race and ethnicity (Melomo 2003). The focus of my research has been primarily on the original “Indians”; that is, South Asian Americans, who are mostly relatively recent immigrants to this country. However, having a background in archaeology and teaching at a small liberal arts college, I have offered an introduction to archaeology course for most of the past ten years that has included an annual pilgrimage to the Jamestown site. Through these visits, through further reflection, and through some further research, I have sought to make some sense of Jamestown in relation to our history and our contemporary context. This paper is thus an attempt to reconcile my peculiar history and interests, as well as the peculiarity of the stories that we tell about our past and our present, and thus ourselves.

When I first began reflecting on the topic of Jamestown, I was struck by the oddity of a celebration of Englishness at this moment in the history of the U.S. and of the South in particular. We live in a time when diversity is increasingly acknowledged and celebrated; when diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion is on the rise; and when global connections are expanding and increasingly considered important. However, this is also a time when efforts to embrace that diversity are still being strongly contested, and global interactions are also often seen as threatening, particularly by anti-immigrant nativists and Christian nationalists. Given these contradictory realities, I felt it important to explore the significance of a Jamestown Commemoration in this context. To do so, in this paper
I first argue that Jamestown is most significantly a national symbol; then, I consider some specific meanings given to Jamestown as a national symbol; and then, I explore the relevance of Jamestown to our contemporary diversity. In addressing the latter point, I discuss how the complex context of Jamestown in the 17th century provides some interesting correlations with our current situation, offering us an important opportunity for constructing a national creation story that speaks more to our current diversity, albeit perhaps in complicated ways.

JAMESTOWN AS NATIONAL SYMBOL

Jamestown is a place, a geography, a landscape where people acted and made history. However, Jamestown’s significance for my discussion is less in terms of the particulars of actors and events in this history and more in terms of how we remember their broader significance—or do not remember them—and how we reconstitute them in relation to the present. In this sense, Jamestown is perhaps best understood as a symbol of that imagined community of a nation (Anderson 1991[1983]). The commemoration of Jamestown every fifty years can be seen as the ritual process that reinforces the power of that symbol and reconfigures its meaning. Jamestown Commemorations can thus be understood as a kind of invented tradition, one that is part of the process of defining who we are as a people (Hobsbawm 1983). This is ultimately what makes Jamestown so interesting, and so important.

Jamestown has for over a hundred years been celebrated as “the birthplace of our nation.” Tracing the origins of any identity, value, or behavior is always a terribly complicated affair. Trying to identify where “America” began or where “democracy” originated is a little like paleoanthropologists and archaeologists trying to trace when we became human; such research is always interesting, but hardly ever
definitive. It is clear that the political entity known as the United States that now spreads from the Atlantic into the Pacific is tied to the history at Jamestown, perhaps most specifically in the fact that I am speaking to you in English right now. However, it is also important to note that the settlers at Jamestown could not possibly have imagined the U.S. in its current manifestation and certainly had virtually no notion of an American identity, or of a United States. While Jamestown was certainly of great historical significance to the U.S., I suggest that we could have a strikingly similar, complicated state, varied population, and national identity, with or without Jamestown.

Nevertheless, in 2007, Jamestown was commemorated in a way that virtually no other place in our country has been so far. Jamestown was celebrated as the national symbol, the origin story, the creation myth of our state. Recognized widely as the birthplace of our nation, it was celebrated as the place where democracy, liberty, diversity, freedom of religion, free enterprise, a spirit of exploration, hard work, determination, the rule of law, private property, and virtually all that is thought good in America had originated. As Kupperman states in The Jamestown Project, however, when looked at closely, Jamestown can also be seen as “the creation story from hell,” the place where Native Americans were slaughtered, Africans enslaved, people starved, industries failed, and martial law sometimes prevailed (Kupperman 2007, 1). The ugly warts of the Jamestown project, though better acknowledged in the 2007 Commemoration than in the past, have not been enough to unsettle Jamestown’s place in our creation myth.

Apart from being recognized as the birthplace of America, Jamestown is also most often, and more definitively, recognized as the earliest permanent English settlement in what became the U.S. It is important to consider then that Jamestown could have been celebrated
not as America’s story writ large, but as the story of a specific people, the English in the Americas. The fact that it was not commemorated in this way only helps to reinforce the place of the English in U.S. history and culture. What is implicit in the ritual focus on Jamestown as the birthplace of America is that the Anglo tradition and identity is the American one. Understood through Barthes’ (1972) concept of exnomination, the ideology of English (or perhaps White) superiority in America is thus taken for granted by going unnamed. However, since the Jamestown Commemoration was not just a celebration of Englishness, but rather a celebration of some non-ethnically specific Americanness, then the question remains, what is being celebrated? What do we commemorate about being “American” following from this colonial settlement?

JAMESTOWN AND DEMOCRACY

Recent writings and commentary on Jamestown most typically refer to democracy as the key virtue inherited from the early settlers at the site. Portrayed sometimes as a veritable Athens of the New World, Jamestown is said to be the location of the first representative assembly some twelve years into its troubled existence. Of course, one need only give that early history just a glance to come to the conclusion that Jamestown was not a democracy that most of us would recognize, support, and promote today. If we see democracy as a government of, by, and for the people, then Jamestown is left badly wanting. My point here is to suggest that the Jamestown Commemoration was as much, or more, a celebration of the idea of democracy, and of the idea of America, as it was a celebration of an historic reality; and thus we should understand that Jamestown’s significance today is perhaps really more symbolic than historical.
Perhaps one of the most interesting, and potentially important, appropriations of Jamestown as a national symbol was by the current head of the executive of these United States, George Bush. President Bush delivered an address at Jamestown as part of America’s Anniversary Weekend (Bush 2007). Of course the very presence of the President at the commemoration is part of the process through which Jamestown is affirmed as a national symbol. In his address at the commemoration ceremony, Bush essentially offered a story of America as an ever-expanding democracy, politically, and geographically. In his remarks he linked the present and the past by referring to the settlers at Jamestown along with the countries of Afghanistan and Iraq. A myth about the past was used to reinforce a myth about our present. In his speech he called upon us to see the settlement of Jamestown as an important early effort to spread democracy. Of course this is the same argument Bush makes for supporting the military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; that is, to spread democracy. Bush also linked the past and the present by suggesting that commemorating our ties to the English at Jamestown makes sense today because the English and the U.S. are brothers in arms in the continuing fight to spread democracy around the world.

Through Bush’s commemoration address we see most clearly the elevation of Jamestown to a national symbol, and a symbol of democracy; and we see the clear association of the English with this symbol, in both the present and the past. Bush’s remarks at the commemoration could, however, otherwise be seen as inclusive, clearly acknowledging the place that Native Americans and African Americans had in his American story. As I now discuss, however, some American groups felt excluded by Bush’s inclusiveness, and other American groups simply were not part of the commemoration at all.
JAMESTOWN AND THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Despite Bush’s emphasis on the Jamestown venture as being somehow preordained by God, he was careful not to emphasize, or even mention, the specifically Christian nature of the English venture at Jamestown. One of the most notable examples of the diverse claims made upon Jamestown as a national symbol is that of the Christian nationalists. As Jamestown is upheld as a symbol of the nation, it is not surprising that it gets caught up in the current religious politics surrounding our national identity. The commemoration of Jamestown became yet another opportunity for the Christian right to decry what it sees as an overly secular government and to portray the U.S. as a nation where God is under attack—a nation that was once close to God, but has since fallen from grace.

The Christian Law Association website (www.christianlaw.org) featured an article entitled “Jamestown: Where America Became a Christian Nation,” which says that Jamestown “was dedicated to God and to the expansion of the Christian faith” (CLA 2008). Lamenting the current situation, this article states, “Since appreciation for both religion and patriotism has reached a low ebb in 2007, no official government ceremonies commemorating the dedication of our nation to God in 2007 are planned for the 400th anniversary of Jamestown” (CLA 2008).

In response to the perceived exclusion of Christians from the commemoration, an organization called Vision Forum Ministries (2008) created “Jamestown Quadricentennial: A Celebration of America’s Providential History.” The weeklong event was scheduled to include everything from history tours to kiddie rides, firearms demonstrations to Christian speakers. Pat Robertson also held his own commemoration, and a Virginia megachurch held a conference featuring a costumed reenactment of the original landing at which
the participants planted white crosses with “One Nation Under God” inscribed (Clarkson 2007). Clearly, the Christian nationalists are not interested in claiming religious freedom as an inheritance from our Jamestown ancestors.

The conflict over the rightful place of Christianity in a commemoration of Jamestown is but one aspect of the complexity of the commemoration in relation to our nation’s diversity. For the remainder of the paper, I would like to say more about this diversity in the past and present, and how it has (and has not) been commemorated.

JAMESTOWN AND DIVERSITY: NATIVE AMERICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

Another aspect of Americanness that has figured largely in the discourse of the 2007 Jamestown commemoration is the diversity of our country, a topic more avoided in the past. For the first time in the history of Jamestown commemorations, the diversity and complexity of cultural and ethnic interactions that was part of the Jamestown experience was well recognized. The Jamestown 400th Commemoration Commission Act of 2000 stated among its purposes: “to assist in ensuring that the Jamestown 2007 observances are inclusive and appropriately recognize the experiences of all people present in 17th century Jamestown.” Members of the federal Commission and the Virginia-based Jamestown 2007 Steering Committee included Native Americans and African Americans; the primary educational exhibits and teaching materials about Jamestown addressed their experiences; and the “Signature Events” of the commemoration included a variety of events focused on these two groups. In fact, the very use of the language of “commemoration,” rather than “celebration,” was a result of the inclusion of Native Americans in this process.
The specifically Native American and African American events that were part of the commemoration included symposia, museum displays, educational programs, and media events. Broadly, these addressed the place of Native Americans and African Americans in the past and how that experience relates to the present. For example, PBS television host Tavis Smiley led his annual State of the Black Union address in Virginia in 2007, bringing together African American notables to explore “The African American Imprint on America.” In conjunction with the commemoration events at Jamestown, events were also held in other Virginia locales, including an American Indian Intertribal Festival, as well as a Virginia Black Expo.

In his remarks, even President Bush acknowledged the troubling interactions of diverse groups in the colonial past. He said, “The expansion of Jamestown came at a terrible cost to the native tribes of the region, who lost their lands and their way of life. And for many Africans, the journey to Virginia represented the beginnings of a life of hard labor and bondage” (Bush 2007). The Queen herself echoed Bush, saying, “Human progress rarely comes without cost,” and she noted the need to recognize the significance of Jamestown in relation to “when three great civilisations came together for the first time—Western European, Native American, and African” (Queen Elizabeth II 2007).

In all of these ways, the Jamestown Commemorations of 2007 clearly differed from past commemorations. In contrast, the Commemoration of 1957, at which the Queen also appeared, had been criticized for being a nearly all-White celebration (Rothstein 2007). In 1957, the State of Virginia was actively resisting the challenges of the Civil Rights Movement in ways that echoed in the Jamestown Commemoration. Circa 1957, Jamestown,
as the birthplace of America, was the birthplace of a people who still then largely equated their national identity with race.

This embrace of the Native American and African place in the colonial experience was not without its critics from diverse perspectives. An essay in the *National Review* (Kavulla 2007) lamented that Native Americans were incorrectly portrayed as passive victims in the commemoration events and complained that African Americans were overrepresented in the commemoration in that their numbers were relatively few until the latter part of the 17th century. The conservative media organization *World Net* posted an article criticizing President Bush and the Queen for having “jumped onto the politically correct bandwagon” for acknowledging the diversity of the past (Unruh 2007). Peter Brimelow’s anti-immigrant website *V-Dare.com*, includes several articles from Pat Buchanan and others criticizing the representations of diversity in the recent Jamestown commemoration. An article by Allan Wall (2007), entitled “Memo from Mexico, Celebrate (Don’t Just “Commemorate”) Jamestown!,” expresses concern that four hundred years after the English settlement in Jamestown first helped keep the Spanish at bay, “Spanish-speakers may yet grab the whole territory—through immigration.”

Alternatively, more radical Native American and African American groups, such as the American Indian Movement and the New Black Panther Party, considered the commemoration a whitewash of history and a glorification of European colonialism (Zander 2007). The website stolencontinent.org ridiculed the Native American groups that performed for the Queen and argued that as an alternative to such commemorations there should be international days of remembrance akin to Jewish remembrances of the Holocaust (Cordova 2008).
JAMESTOWN AND DIVERSITY: LATIN AMERICANS AND ASIAN AMERICANS

While some have criticized the extent to which diversity was celebrated at Jamestown, I actually would like to argue that the commemoration of Jamestown could and perhaps should have been even more inclusive. My simple point is that if Jamestown’s significance is as a national symbol, and if democracy is what gives that symbol meaning, then why not expand the telling of the story in a way that better represents and incorporates the people of our contemporary nation? To do so is not simply to add another “me too” to the multicultural list, but rather to speak more to the complexity of the context of Jamestown in ways that are historically accurate and also allow for the telling of an even more complex and relevant story.

As I have already noted, the diversity represented in the Jamestown Commemoration of 2007 was a corrective to exclusions of 1957 and earlier. I suggest, however, that in making this corrective the Jamestown Commemoration of 2007 in some ways ignored the America that it should reflect today. Since 1957, we have seen movements of civil rights and human rights, Black Power and Red Power. Now, the cultural and ethnic politics of 2007 are more about immigration and other global flows, about Minutemen and English Only proposals, about Chinese capital and jobs in India, and about religious fundamentalists abroad and in our heartland. The origin story that we create about Jamestown needs to address these new forms of diversity and these new global challenges that we confront and that we seek to understand.

Specifically, what is missing most from the official commemorations, discussions, and celebrations at early Jamestown is mention of Asians and Latin Americans. This is, of course, appropriate to a degree, since there were neither Asians nor Latinos in great numbers
at Jamestown. However, if Jamestown is to be offered as a symbol of our nation, as a place where the qualities of our nation that we cherish today had their origins, then I argue that it would be appropriate to give these places and peoples more mention.4

I see in the commemoration of Jamestown an opportunity to explore some peculiar conjunctures between the past and the present—conjunctures which perhaps give us a different way of looking at Jamestown and a different way of looking at our diversity in the present. In a certain sense, in 1607 at Jamestown we see some English-speaking, Christian, Protestant men, struggling to stake out a claim to territory and identity, fearful of the spread of Spanish speakers, mostly Catholic, to the South and West. Sound familiar? We can also see Jamestown 1607 as a step in part of a longer process of wealthy White folks looking to maximize their economic opportunity through connections with Asia. Sound familiar again? I think these characterizations of Jamestown in and after 1607 speak in some important ways to the U.S. in 2007. If we can acknowledge that from our earliest days, from the very beginning of our story as a people, Latinos and Asians played a part, then we have a different story of our past and a different understanding of our present. I think a story of the past that is relevant today is that by 1607 there had been more Spanish descended folks in the landmass that became the U.S. than there were English.5 Also, while Asians did not play as significant a role, there were at least a few South Asians in Jamestown by the 1620s, and the dream that brought the English to Jamestown, was at least partly a dream about Asia (Assisi 2007).

Expanding the American origin story as told through Jamestown is perhaps most important because for the past thirty years or so Latinos and Asians have been the fastest-growing populations in the U.S., and throughout the South as well (Bernstein 2004). The Census
Bureau’s 2006 American Community Survey estimates that persons of Hispanic or Latino origin represent about 15 percent of the population, and Asians approximately 5 percent; and nearly 1 in 5 Americans above the age of 5 speaks a language other than English at home. In considering these numbers, national celebrations of Englishness should seem peculiar and will continue to seem increasingly so. I suggest that the Jamestown Commemoration of 2057 will need to speak a different language, metaphorically at least, if it is to communicate a meaningful origin story to a changing nation.  

NOTES

1. While numerous scholars across diverse disciplines have documented this diversity, this paper was particularly influenced by Cultural Diversity in the U.S. South, Anthropological Contributions to a Region in Transition, Southern Anthropological Society Proceedings, No. 31, edited by Carole E. Hill and Patricia D. Beaver.


3. Previous celebrations have incorporated non-Whites as participants and visitors, but they have not emphasized diversity as a central American value with its beginnings at Jamestown (Gleach 2003).
4. It is interesting to note that even Polish Americans sought to use the Jamestown Commemoration as an opportunity to emphasize their place in the American fabric. The President of the Polish American Congress and Polish National Alliance encouraged Polonia organizations “to inform and teach others why we commemorate the establishment of a Nation and the contribution of those first Polish pioneers and the beginning of an American Polonia” (Spula 2007).

5. Interestingly, as I was working on this paper, the Berry Site of North Carolina, studied by David Moore of Warren Wilson College and others, was featured on a UNC-TV segment “Exploring North Carolina.” The site includes remains of a mid-16th-century Spanish fort in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, many years before the settlement of Jamestown.

6. Commemorations are, of course, political—they are selective, and laden with complex meanings, and therefore require ongoing critical inquiry. I hope that my comments are a useful contribution to this inquiry and do nothing to diminish the intelligence, creativity, and good will that clearly informed the recent Jamestown commemorations.

WORKS CITED


Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA).


