Islands of time: *The Tempest* and cultural memory

When Antonio, in his conspiracy to overthrow the King of Naples, tells Sebastian to “perform an act / Whereof what’s past is prologue, what to come / In yours and my discharge” (2.1.252–54), his language does strange things to Time. That ‘is’, a floating piece of text rearing up its head between the past and the future, draws our attention to the gap that it occupies. It clears out all action from the space of the present, and hangs isolated between past events and the yet-unsettled succession ‘to come’, simply a possibility framed by conversation and remembrance. “I remember / You did supplant your brother Prospero” (2.1.272–73), Sebastian says in response.

*The Tempest* itself is a floating text, in as much as its island *locus* is notoriously impossible to pin down in space, and there has been much provocative speculation about its possible Atlantic, Mediterranean and Irish contexts. It is equally difficult to fix its literary bearings. Barbara Mowat has noted that it is famously “different from such plays as *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter’s Tale*, plays in which a single literary or historical work provides an obvious controlling infracontext; but it has much in common with, for example, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play whose surface context rests on a disparate and complex infracontextual system” (Mowat 28). It is also a text obsessed with acts of remembering. Full of the memories that Prospero

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1 Mowat adapts Claes Schaar’s concept of ‘infracontext’ here, which distinguishes itself from traditional source study by arguing that the concept of a “vertical context system” (Schaar 1978, 382) is more aligned with the reading habits of the Renaissance than simple one-to-one correspondence between source and allusion. Schaar argues that while the question ‘Is this passage an allusion?’ does not always make sense or provide useful insight, the question ‘Does this passage suggest some other passage?’ always does. His concept of a ‘vertical context system’, therefore, posits “a surface context charged with additional meaning by contact with a deep context, an infracontext, bearing some kind of verbal similarity to the surface context. [...] In a great number of cases [...] the meaning of the surface context is modified, amplified, reinforced or brought into contrast by the infracontext” (1978, 382).
carries of his brother’s treachery, as befits the protagonist of a play of revenge, it forms itself around whispered accounts. There is the one that he tells Miranda about a childhood that she does not quite remember, the prehistories that Caliban and Ariel seem to remember only too clearly, and the absent presences, like the references to Sycorax and Claribel, which linger insistently in the background. The role that memory repeatedly performs in the play has received ample attention in recent years (cf. Walch; Tribble; Perkins Wilder; Hiscock). My interest is not so much in how memory works within the narrative of the play, as it is in what surfaces out of the matrix of memories of which the play itself is a part. The primary impulse in this essay is to trace the links that flow back and forth between *The Tempest* and another narrative that would become a foundational fiction of a nation, the story of the English adventurer John Smith’s encounter with Native American Pocahontas in seventeenth century Virginia. Both these narratives are remembering agents themselves, as well as objects remembered within a wider, shared cultural memory. I am suggesting that following the exchange between the two reveals the kind of multidirectional approach that certain cultural conversations demand of us, a form of reading that conflates the gesture back and glance forward, the ‘past’ and the ‘prologue’.

**What John Smith remembered**

The strands of the exchange that I want to follow here weave back and forth, but 1607 offers a natural point of inception. On 26 April 1607, three ships sent by the first expedition of the English Virginia Company – the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed* and the *Discovery* – entered the Chesapeake Bay. In December of that year, the Pamunkey warchief Opechancanough and his men captured the leader of one of the parties sent inland by the English settlers to explore up the Chickahominy River, a tributary of the James River about six miles from the fledgling Jamestown settlement. Opechancanough kept his English prisoner for a few weeks, before sending him to be presented before his brother and leader, Powhatan, also known as Wahunsenacawh or Mamantoick (‘great king’), supreme chief of over thirty Algonquian-speaking tribal groups along the length of the Virginia coast. The Algonquians had come across white men before, especially the Spanish. Now, faced with intermittent Spanish attacks on the one hand and constant tension with neighbouring tribes on the other, it seemed that Powhatan was keen to size up these new arrivals and test their strength and intentions. It was important for the English too. An alliance with Powhatan would be crucial for the survival of Jamestown, yet all their attempts to make contact with him so far had failed. Over the next two decades and beyond, the part played in this drama by Pocahontas, Powhatan’s daughter, who supposedly saved the Englishman’s
life at this momentous first encounter, would grow into one of the most iconic cross-cultural meetings in the New World.

‘Pocahontas’ or ‘the Little Wanton’, also known as Matoaka or Amonute, was about nine or ten in 1607, a lively child who seems to have taken a keen interest in the English settlers. Known to be a particular favourite of her father, she in turn would be kidnapped by the English in 1613, convert to Christianity and be renamed as ‘Rebecca’. She married the English settler, John Rolfe, and in 1616, travelled to England with her husband and son. Here, as John Chamberlain reported in one of his many letters to Sir Dudley Carleton, “[t]he Virginian woman Poca-huntas, with her father[’s] counsaillor hath ben with the King and graciously used, and both she and her assistant well placed at the maske. She is on her return (though sore against her will) yf the wind wold come about to send them away” (Chamberlain 50). Pocahontas met John Smith for a final time during this visit, but never did return to Virginia. She died the following year just before the ship was due to set sail, and was buried at Gravesend (cf. Barbour 1969a; Mossiker; Price; Rennie; Rountree 1990 and 2005).

John Smith’s life is as strikingly different as one could imagine from that of his unlikely saviour. A Lincolnshire yeoman’s son whose ambitions drove him to study Machiavelli’s *Art of War* and Marcus Aurelius’s *Dial of Princes* as well as honing his skills in riding and jousting with an expatriate Italian in the neighbourhood, his military career reads like a romance. As a young soldier and adventurer, he travelled in France and the Low Countries, then to the Balkans and Hungary. He was captured and enslaved by the Ottomans in Russia, escaped and travelled through central Europe, Morocco and the coast of Northern Africa. At the age of about twenty-six, he returned to England just as the plans to establish a new English colony in Virginia were unfolding (cf. Barbour 1964; Vaughan 1975). At the time of his capture by the Algonquians, he had been newly elected to the fledgling Virginia colony’s council and was destined to become the first *de facto* governor of Virginia within a year of his meeting with Powhatan.

Smith produced two early versions of his account of this momentous meeting. The first was written as a letter within months of the encounter and sent back on the supply ship, *The Phoenix*. On its arrival in England in 1608, it was adapted for publication by ‘I. H.’ (John Healey) – possibly without Smith’s permission or knowledge – as *A True Relation of Such Occurrences of...*
Noate as Hath Happened in Virginia. The second, written in collaboration with other Virginia colonists, was printed in 1612 in two parts: The Map of Virginia and The Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia. It has been pointed out before that neither of these actually mention Pocahontas’s involvement in that incident. In the first account, A True Relation (1608), Smith only notes his reception by Powhatan, who “kindly welcomed me with good wordes, and great Platters of sundrie victuals” (sig. C1v). The nearest we come to any reference to coercion are indirect and fleeting. The True Relation mentions Powhatan “assuring mee his friendship, and my libertie within foure dayes” (sig. C1v), and the Proceedings simply note that Smith “procured his owne liberty” (sig. C1v). The choice of words in both cases suggests that Smith believed his ‘liberty’ to be threatened by the Algonquians at some point, although the actual details of his experience vary considerably from account to account.

In any case, as further versions of the encounter emerged over the next two decades, the story assumed the known contours which are familiar to us from numerous modern retellings on screen and in print. The first reference to Pocahontas’s role appeared in New Englands Trials (second ed., 1622). Here, Smith tells the story of how his companions fled leaving him a captive of the tribe, “yet God made Pocahontas the Kings daughter the meanes to deliver me” (sig. C2v). Reference is made to this deliverance again in the 1623 broad-side advertisement of Smith’s much longer account, The Generall Historie of Virginia. However, it was only when the Historie was printed in the following year, seventeen years after the event itself supposedly had occurred, that the story emerged in its familiar form for the first time:

Before a fire upon a seat like a bedsted, [Powhatan] sat covered with a great robe, made of Rarowcun skinnes, and all the tayles hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of 16 or 18 yeares, and along on each side the house, two rowes of men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red; many of their heads bedecked with the white downe of Birds; but every one with something; and a great chayne of white beads about their necks. At [Smith’s] entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queene of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, in stead of a Towell to dry them: having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braine, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevale, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper. (sig. G4v–H1r)
Dwelling on this narrative raises a number of problems. Firstly, the multiple versions of Smith’s story and its increasing elaboration in the later iterations throw the veracity of the account as a whole into question (cf. Fuller). Secondly, even if Smith’s report is largely accurate in its description of events and Native American culture, it seems unlikely that he would have understood the full significance of his experiences among the Algonquians. As recent studies by Lemay and Gleach have argued, it is possible that what Smith perceived as a threat to his life and liberty was the traditional initiation ceremony through which the Algonquians redefined their worldview to include the English settlers, and adopted Smith himself into Powhatan’s tribe as a local chief or werowance (cf. Lemay; Gleach). Thirdly and crucially for our purposes - what does this have to do with The Tempest? Geoffrey Bullough’s foundational account of Shakespeare’s narrative and dramatic sources magisterially asserted that to compare Pocahontas to Miranda is a “tempting fancy which must be sternly repressed” (241). Bullough’s caveat has a point. The first recorded performance of Shakespeare’s play was in November 1611, more than a decade before the first complete account of Pocahontas’s act of mercy emerged in The Generall Historie of Virginia (1624).

Leaving aside such doubts and caveats for the moment, however, allows us to follow a different entry into the conversation between the two texts. It begins with the first, rather than the most iconic, of the meetings between Pocahontas and John Smith. Within the True Relation of Such Occurrences of Noate as Hath Happened in Virginia, the first printed account with its telling silence regarding Smith’s deliverance, a different captivity narrative lies hidden, buried among numerous other incidents. Shortly after Smith’s release by Powhatan in 1608, a meeting was arranged between Powhatan and Captain Christopher Newport, the overall commander of the English expedition. Part of the business was a diplomatic exchange. In a move that was not unusual among early European settlers in the Americas, the English decided to swap the suitably-named thirteen-year-old English boy called Thomas Savage in return for one of Powhatan’s favourites, Namontack (cf. Vaughan 2000 49–59). While the latter accompanied Newport as Powhatan’s first official envoy to King James I when he sailed for England, Thomas Savage was to stay with the Algonquians and learn their language. He was returned after a few weeks, but quickly became a pawn in the negotiations between the English and the Algonquians again when Smith accused and captured some of Powhatan’s people for stealing weapons from the English settlement. What happens in Smith’s story is best told in his own words from the True Relation:

Powhatan understanding we detained certaine Salvages, sent his Daughter, a child al tenne yeares old, which not only for feature, countenance, & proportion much exceedeth any of the rest of his people, but for wit, and spirit, the only Nonpariel
of his Country: this hee sent by his most trustie messenger, called Rawhunt, as
much exceeding in deformitie of person, but of a subtill wit, and crafty under-
standing, he with a long circumstance, told mee, how well Powhatan, loved and
respected mee, and in that I should not doubt any way of his kindnesse. He had
sent his child, which he most esteemed, to see mee, a Deere, and bread, besides for
a present: desiring me that the Boy [Thomas Savage, known to Powhatan as
Newport’s ‘son’] might come againe, which he loved exceedingly, his little
Daughter hee had taught this lesson also... (sig. E3v).

It is understandable if there are images here that seem familiar. Looming
behind The Tempest is a rich tessellation of allusions and references. We know
that the old worlds of the Aeneid and the medieval chivalric romances have a
place within it (cf. Hamilton; Bullough 237–339). So do the texts that emerged
from Europe’s encounter with the new world. Florio’s translation of
Montaigne’s essay “Of the Canniballes”, Antonio Pigafetta’s accounts of
Patagonia, and the reports of the wreck of the Sea Venture on the coast of the
Bermudas in 1609 by William Strachey, are only a few, if the best known,
among the latter (cf. Vaughan and Vaughan 1991, 43). Smith’s 1608 letter
occupies a place within that network. Newport, who first instigated that
exchange of ‘boys’, would become the captain of the ill-fated Sea Venture in
1609. If, as it has been argued frequently, Shakespeare was interested enough
in English experiences in the New World to draw on Stratchey’s account in
manuscript form, then one might expect him also to have read the first
printed account of the Virginia expedition that was offered by Smith’s True
Relation. The resonances evoked are striking. Smith’s account of his first
meeting with Pocahontas weaves its moment of encounter around the famil-
 iar image of a young girl pleading for the lives of endangered men and a
much-loved ‘Boy’ to a stern European patriarch and governor, while the
representation of the messenger ‘Rawhunt’, a curious combination of physi-
cal deformity and quickness of wit, gestures forward to both Caliban and
Ariel. The word ‘nonpareil’ itself extends a fragile tendril from one text to
another. It is an established, distinctive adjective for Pocahontas. In The
Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia (1612), Smith himself would
describe her again as “the very nonparell of [Powhatan’s] kingdome” (sig.
O2r). It was picked up subsequently in other accounts of English settlers in
Virginia, such as Ralph Hamor, whose True Discourse of the Present Estate of
Virginia (1615) refers to “Powhatans delight and darling, his daughter Poca-
huntas, (whose fame hath even bin spred in England by the title of Nonparella

4 Strachey’s account would be printed in 1625, two years after the printing of the familiar
Pocahontas story in the Generall History. Other Bermuda pamphlets which have often
been linked to The Tempest include Sylvester Jourdain’s Discovery of The Bermudas (1610)
and Virginia Company’s A True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie in Virginia (1610).
of *Virginia*”) (sig. B2v). Shakespeare’s Caliban notably uses it for Miranda, when he tells Stephano and Trinculo that Prospero has a daughter:

> And that most deeply to consider is
> The beauty of his daughter; he himself
> Calls her a nonpareil. I never saw a woman
> But only Sycorax, my dam, and she;
> But she as far surpasseth Sycorax
> As great’st does least. (3.2.98–103)

The crucial point, of course, is that this traffic in ideas is not unidirectional. If the fragmented memories of Smith’s early New World account may be discerned lingering behind *The Tempest*’s own figuring of a moment of first encounter between the King of Naples’s son and the Duke of Milan’s “more braver daughter” (1.2.440) and Prospero’s feigned anger, the subsequent received narrative of the Pocahontas story itself gestures back at older stories, including *The Tempest*. At the simplest level, Smith’s act of remembrance is a record not only of his own story, but a response to a narrative trope that had become a part of the shared lore of travel. Behind it loom familiar shadows of countless women of classical and medieval narratives, from Ariadne and Medea to Bevis of Hampton’s Josian and Cervantes’s Zoraida in *Don Quixote*. Young, alien women pleading for the lives of European heroes to unsympathetic patriarchs constituted a well-established narrative trope in European fiction and drama. They were especially visible in this period, as we know, in the captivity narratives and plays based on Iberian conflicts both with the old world of Islamic empires, the Turks and the Ottomans, and the new world of the Americas. As a wealth of recent work on the English ‘Turk plays’ has pointed out, such stories were familiar and widely available for popular consumption in England (cf. Matar; Vitkus 2001 and 2003; Dimmock; Voigt).

Closer to home, one story familiar to New World travellers like Smith was that of a young Spanish explorer called Juan Ortiz, found during Hernando De Soto’s 1539 expedition in Florida (cf. Voigt 99–153). Accounts of the expedition report how De Soto’s men spotted a “Christian, naked and sun-burnt,” among the native Americans, “his arms tattooed after their manner, and he in no respect differing from them” (Fidalgo of Elvas 27). Once he is taken back to the Spanish camp, it emerges that in 1527–8, twelve years before the De Soto expedition, Juan Ortiz had been trapped and captured by the warriors of the Indian chief Hirrihigua. Tied to a barbacoa (a smoking and drying rack

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5 As the full title suggests, Pocahontas is at the centre of Hamor’s account.

6 It is a word that Shakepeare uses rarely and only here in complete earnest. Olivia might be the ‘nonpareil’ of beauty, but she is proud (cf. *Twelfth Night* 1.5); Posthumous tortures himself with the thought that Imogen only ‘seem’d’ the nonpareil of the times (cf. *Cymbeline*, 2.5). Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra* (3.2) and the hired assassin of Banquo and Fleance in *Macbeth* (3.4) are nonpareils of a very different kind.
for foods and hides, a word that survives today as ‘barbeque’) and about to be set on fire, he was saved through the intervention of the daughter of the chief (and in some versions, his wife) and made to serve them as a slave. The two best known versions of Ortiz’s own account were widely known in Europe and England. Garcilaso de la Vega’s La Florida del Inca was published in 1605. Richard Hakluyt, who would have accompanied Smith and the others on the first Virginia expedition if he had not changed his mind inexplicably at the last moment, and whose steady stream of travel accounts, according to the poet Michael Drayton’s Ode ‘To the Virginian voyage,’ “inflame[d] / men to seeke fame,” (56) printed his version in the pamphlet, *Virginia richly valued*, in 1609 and again in 1611.

Smith’s fondness for this particular trope is evident, and markedly combines its influences from the old world of Mediterranean clashes with Islamic forces with the new world of the Americas. It emerges tellingly in the *Generall Historie of Virginia*, for example, where he offers a quick review of his female protectors in his dedicatory epistle to Frances, Duchess of Lennox and Richmond, reminiscing how

honorable and vertuous Ladies, and comparable but amongst themselves, have offred me rescue and protection in my greatest dangers: even in foreign parts, I have felt relief from that sex. The beauteous Lady Tragabigzanda, when I was a slave to the Turkes, did all she could to secure me. When I overcame the Bashaw of Nalbrits in Tartaria, the charitable Lady Callamata supplyed my necessities. In the utmost of many extremities, that blessed Pokahontas, the great Kings daughter of Virginia, oft saved my life. When I escaped the crueltie of Pirats and most furious stormes, a long time alone in a small Boat at Sea, and driven ashore in France, the good Lady Madam Chanoyes, bountifully assisted me. (sig. [ii]v)

That litany of adventure and deliverance admittedly reads like an unlikely retelling of a chivalric romance, but that romanticisation was necessary for Smith, whose evident ambition ‘to seeke fame’ in Virginia in particular were fraught with clashes that developed along lines of social difference. Smith had found himself in trouble even before landing in Virginia by opposing Edward-Maria Wingfield, one of the gentleman investors of the expedition travelling abroad the *Susan Constant*. Like many of the gentlemen leaders of the Jamestown venture, Wingfield resented the recognition that the Company had given to Smith’s experience by naming him as a member of the colony’s ruling council, and is reported to have said later that “if he were in England he would think scorne [t]his man should be [his] Companyon” (Barbour 1969b, 220). Smith was accused of planning a mutiny “to usurp the government, murder the council, and make himself king” (ibid. 381). Narrowly escaping hanging and placed under restraints, on their arrival in Virginia he was initially barred from admission to the council despite the Company’s instructions, and “an oration made, whie Captaine Smith was not
admitted of the Councell as the rest” (ibid. 379). In the face of such opposition, Smith’s attempt, both in Virginia and subsequently in the various versions of his experiences produced in England, is to reconfigure himself as a hero of a new world, whose hard-earned experience nevertheless reflects the familiar narrative trajectories of the old. Both the social impetus and the romance transformation it triggers are at once recorded and denied tellingly in *The Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia* (1612), which notes:

Some propheticall spirit calculated hee had the Salvages in such subjection, hee would have made himselfe a king, by marrying Pocahontas, Powhatans daughter. It is true she was the very nomparell of his kingdome, and at most not past 13 or 14 yeares of age. Very oft shee came to our fort, with what shee could get for Captain Smith, that ever loved and used all the Countrie well, but her especially he ever much respected: and she so well requited it, that when her father intended to have surprized him, shee by stealth in the darke night came through the wild woods and told him of it. But her marriage could no way have intitled him by any right to the kingdome, nor was it ever suspected hee had ever such a thought, or more regarded her, or any of them, then in honest reason, and discretion he might. If he would he might have married her, or have done what him listed. For there was none that could have hindered his determination. (sig. O2r)

In Smith’s expanding series of accounts of captivity and deliverance, therefore, it is possible to see a slow accretion of multiple memories, translated across space and time, old worlds and new. Taking elements from the familiar romance of European captivity narratives, combining them with his own past experiences in other lands and in other circumstances, what Smith ultimately produces in the Pocahontas story is a tessellation of the personal and the collective. *The Tempest* is a part of that matrix of memories. Smith had sailed back to England in October 1609, which meant that he would have been present in England throughout the years surrounding *The Tempest*’s first recorded performance in 1611, and its repeat performance at court in 1613, during the wedding celebrations of James I’s daughter to Frederic, the Elector Palatine, before embarking on his next voyage to New England in 1614. So, a decade later, when the young English boy and the Algonquian prisoners, equally helpless pawns in a bigger game, are erased from his recollections, and their place taken by the reworking of a familiar trope in which Smith himself plays the male beneficiary of Pocahontas’s compassion, it would seem that *The Tempest* and Ferdinand and Miranda may well have become a

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7 If this seems uncannily like the rebellions that Antonio and Ferdinand on the one hand, and Stephano and Trinculo on the other, plan on Prospero’s island, then Smith’s well-known disdain for the idleness of the inexperienced gentleman adventurers who attempt to control the expedition also has something in common with the play’s initial striking challenge to social hierarchy: “What cares these roarers for the name of king?” (1.1.16–7). On Smith, in this context, see Jeffrey Knapp. *The Tempest*’s pitting of social discourses against each other is explored brilliantly by David Norbrook.
part of Smith’s memory of that familiar trope of rescue. That composite trope shapes the revision of his account of this moment of cross-cultural encounter, the act of remembering turning the attacker into the heroic protagonist, socio-political negotiation into romance.

**What’s past is prologue**

What exactly is happening here in this conversation, this strange encounter between Smith’s narrative and Shakespeare’s play? The interchange between travel accounts abroad and the fictions that emerge ‘at home’ is nothing new. It is memory to which we need to attend here, and more specifically, to the particular process through which memory is created, transformed and retold both within these texts and beyond. Texts of travel and encounter are dependent understandably on remembrance and retelling, and how memory works is at the heart of our understanding of such records. That memory is open to individual acts of intervention. Yet at the same time, it is equally open to social revision and manipulation. It functions like fiction, like narrative, at a fundamental level. It is fluid. What one remembers, chooses to remember, and chooses to narrate as memory, as Edric Caldicott and Anne Fuchs have pointed out, “are not static representations of past events but ‘advancing stories’ through which both individuals and communities forge their sense of identity” (11–32).

Such a view of memory as a collective and evolving phenomenon has become an increasingly active area of scholarship in recent years. Studies in cultural memory across a range of fields have repeatedly drawn our attention to the fact that memory is neither exclusively nor simply a construct of personal experience, uniquely embodied in an individual presence and individual neurophysiological mechanisms. “[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38), claimed Maurice Halbwachs in his pioneering 1950s study, *On Collective Memory*. Halbwachs’ argument has been nuanced and challenged in many ways by current theorists and the emphasis has shifted largely from the social to the cultural domain, with cultural memory and its relationship to history forming the focus of significant work by scholars such as Jan Assmann, Pierre Nora, James Young, Geoffrey Hartman, Marianne Hirsch, Eric Hobsbawm and Andreas Huyssen. However, there is an overarching emphasis in all such enquiries on the framing of memory by socially constituted forms, narratives and relations, which illuminates some of the puzzles we have been exploring here.

Take *The Tempest* first. We know that acts of remembering and retelling produce much of the narrative dynamics of the play. “Dost thou attend me?” (1.2.78), “Dost thou hear?” (1.2.106), Prospero asks Miranda. “Canst thou
remember /A time before we came unto this cell?" (1.2.38–39). “Certainly, sir, I can,” (1.2.41) says Miranda, but “‘tis far off” (1.2.44). Miranda’s recollection of the female community that protected and surrounded her infancy hardly matches Prospero’s own memories of male political and social competition, yet the story that he offers triggers a valorising response if only because of the shared narrative experience that supplies memory’s place: “Alack, for pity./ I, not rememb’ring how I cried out then, / Will cry it o’er again” (1.2.132–4). As acts of remembrance and memorialisation, such transactions dramatise what Marianne Hirsch has called ‘postmemory’ (cf. 1997). For Hirsch,

postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (2008, 106–107)8

Postmemory, in this context, involves adopting “the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as one’s own” (Hirsch 1999, 9), but at the same time underlines the insurmountable distance between those who lived through the trauma, and those who did not, a distance that constant retelling and memorialisation must attempt to bridge. Prospero’s story, and the play itself, similarly take shape for us with every cumulative narrative of remembrance, from the denunciation of Caliban and the admonition of Ariel to the repentance of the King of Naples. Both their need and validity are corroborated by the gestures back at past retellings that will trigger yet more in times to come. “I must / Once in a month recount what thou hast been, / Which thou forget’st” (1.2.261–3), Prospero tells Ariel, even as at the end, he will promise Alonso to “deliver all” (5.1.314).

Smith, too, offers not only retellings, but memories of retellings of supposedly earlier versions of the encounter. In The Generall Historie of 1624, he claims that he had actually narrated the story of his rescue in a letter he had written to Queen Anna in 1616, of which he now provides an ‘abstract’. That claim is reinforced by the citation of yet another statement of previous narration, reprinted now as a document called “A briefe relation written by Captain Smith to his Majesties Commissioners”. A final reference comes in Smith’s True Travels, Adventures, and Observations, printed in 1630. Here again, readers are reminded how Powhatan “commanded him to be slaine; [and] his daughter Pocahontas saved his life” (58).

Memory works proleptically in these endeavours for listeners within and outside the world of both texts. It inscribes itself by self-consciously creating

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8 Hirsch’s focus, as with much of current work on memory studies and cultural history, is on trauma and the memorial legacy of the Holocaust.
and participating in a communally ‘remembered’ narrative. As Jan Assmann has suggested, using a curiously apposite phrase given our present context, the formation of cultural memory often works in this way. It coalesces around “fixed points [that are] fateful events of the past”, creating “islands of time” that emerge slowly out of the “flow of everyday communications” (Assmann and Czaplicka 129) through repetition and reiteration in a commonly shared cultural domain, their contours fixed through repeated negotiations at multiple levels and among multiple agents. Smith’s close brush with Algonquian ritual and culture in Virginia, increasingly isolated from European faces and European time in each narrative iteration, created such a space. Even more striking is the ‘bare island’ that hosts the present action in Shakespeare’s play, the space of Antonio’s ‘is’. Suspended between “the dark backward” (1.2.50) inscribed in Milan and a future envisioned in Naples, it provides the apt crucible for the formation of memories that can forge a community anew.

It is possible to see such workings of memory continuing to operate outside the texts, even in the status that both narratives claim in our shared memory today. The identification of Smith’s contested experience in the encounter with Powhatan is recognised as a foundational American myth, its place within a national mythos marked out through lengthy debate. The acknowledgement of The Tempest as the focus of our critical and creative engagements with questions of cross-cultural encounter, colonialism, nationhood and power stretches from imaginative interventions such as Aimé Césaire’s Une Tempête and Peter Greenaway’s Prospero’s Books, to the equally longstanding debate about the play as a response to colonial enterprise. Through all such conversations, interventions and retellings, both Smith’s story and The Tempest have emerged as postcolonial cultural icons in their own right, marking imagined moments of exchange, encounter, communication, and resistance in the trauma of early colonial ventures. Like the narratives of The Tempest, such reiterations and debate create their own “islands of time” (Assmann and Czaplicka 129). With each self-acknowledged ‘retelling’, a collective story of first encounter gradually takes shape, the reader’s incremental piecing together of the story itself offering its own additional form of investment in the cultural resonance of the original event. In the traffic of texts and time, each version asks us whether we have been ‘attending’ to the tale, reminding us that we have heard it before, testing whether we remember how the past retellings validate the way in which first contact is meant to unfold in our collective memories. And slowly, we do.

Islands, as Roland Greene has reminded us, were special places in the early modern period:
Islands of time: The Tempest and cultural memory

Celebrated in productions such as utopias, romances and isolarii, islands are held at a premium in the sixteenth century not merely out of geographical curiosity but because they afford a perspective that can have only an oblique relation to the accumulating and totalizing worldview of the imperial and economic centres. (141)

If the ethical and artistic imperative of such ‘island logic’ is inevitably to question ‘mainland’ views, he argues, then “[i]n this light, The Tempest is Shakespeare’s island play, and it applies island logic to its contemporaneous world as well as to its own models and procedures” (Greene 141). But to look at The Tempest and John Smith’s account as ‘islands of time’ is to understand something else about the function of islands. From Circe’s enchanted Aeaea to More’s Utopia, an island is also a space where time might stand still. Or rather, it is a pocket of space that emerges from and outside time even as it is separated from the mainland. The English, “penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos” according to Virgil’s much-cited description from the First Eclogue, would know that above all. ‘Island logic’, in that context, does not simply question the mainland; it offers a space to rethink its very place in time. It is where the mainland stores its revisions both of alterity and identity, created out of and outside of the “flow of [the] everyday” (Assmann and Czaplicka 129).
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