

JIMMIE DURHAM

A Certain Lack of Coherence

Writings on Art and Cultural Politics

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FRANCHISE

A Certain Lack of Coherence

I want all of our history. I need every name, every artefact, every effort. I need to know the minute specific of our history because I need to be part of it. But I am part of it, and could not choose otherwise, the way a Jew is part of the Holocaust. In the Cherokee language the word for the world and the word for history are the same. Our history is, however, too closely tied to yours for the past three hundred and fifty years. It has become strange, untenable, unbearable and, in unbearable ways, untrue. Our history has become lies within your history. The lies have caused me great suffering from the day I was born, but at least I may (must) react to that suffering. You also suffer from the terrible unreality of a false story badly told, but must live within it, and like the torturer and his family in the evening at supper after a day's work, must do your best to continue to pretend that all is normal. I must return to the idea of the torturer later, with great reluctance, (but now that it has been written, its themes lock in with one of the bases of what I'm about to consider).

From our position ... so much is lost, and being lost, we do not recognise the loss. In one twenty-five year period we lost half our people, not once, but twice. Those who remained were in a state of continuous warfare against you, a war aimed at our destruction. Again we lost half our people, and of the remaining, a death here, an early death there, a desperate flight, which required of us every moment of energy and thought. Only imagine, half our doctors, our scientists, our philosophers, our historians (our children). Then again. Again. Again. And in such a war (such a *long* war!) that to laugh or dance or to make something was an incredibly arrogant act of resistance.

Here is something we have kept: an absolutely true and scientific account of our origins. The other animals held a council to see about creating humans (Cherokee). They couldn't agree because each wanted humanity to be like himself. Arguing, they fell asleep at nightfall. The coyote then took a bite from each, swallowed it all and regurgitated a Cherokee ... with attributes of the animals, but most

like the coyote in the love of singing and acting crazy. We have, of course, kept much more, perhaps because we had no books or libraries to rely on or to be burned.

My question must always be, does what we know matter? Does it *matter* if I interrupt your authoritative history with a correction or a footnote? I mean, to the ongoing human discourse in which your declamations must surely be short-lived? Or to you collectively and personally?

As Crazy Horse was being murdered by Indians in US uniforms, he said, after the first few bayonet stabs, "Let me go, my friends, you have hurt me enough". His concern was for them as much as for himself. He understood the relentless confusion that had made them don the uniforms, and wanted to give them a chance to turn back in their hearts at some future moment. (But that made them so afraid they became frenzied, and bayoneted him into their own complete oblivion.)

From now back to the beginnings of our mutual encounter we have tried to protect you in such ways. In honour of that human bravery, I must not take comfort or make profit from the situation. As a victim, I cannot have the luxury of being the victim; nor would it be a kindness (although a great entertainment!) to you.

Neither can you allow yourselves the luxury of curious detachment (and I know, if you have the least bit of intelligence, you must feel detached). The England that you know is made from our deaths. Both the ships and the great machinery, even the cogwheels and gears which crushed little children's hands in the textile mills of the industrial revolution, were made from American wood. They were made from the timber of trees from places called 'Virginia', 'Carolina' and 'Georgia'. Great fortunes, dynasties, were made first from the exploitation of sassafras, then tobacco, then sugar, (three medicines which cause cancer if misused); and always the sale of the skins of the animals who in council had decided that we were a good idea.

As Europeans you must surely hate and fear the monstrosity of the US, the banality of Canada, and the cheerful mindlessness of Australia. But I want you to see them as your best efforts, as the most logical extension of your culture. Your permanent settler colonies are your standard, your proper measure, not an aberration which you can disclaim.

You cannot disclaim them and maintain a necessary intelligence: intelligence demands integrity. Without that integrity there is only gangsterish cunning.

The torturer: Frantz Fanon wrote that Frenchmen torturing

Algerians suffered nightmares and bad nerves. The US torturer in El Salvador feels proud and excited. He is a more perfect Frenchman, a more perfect British colonel. The US is not simply a giant cancerous part of England: it is the perfect England.

Oh, Jesus! How am I ever going to sell any artwork here, talking like that? Well, of course I know that *you* personally are as gentle and lost as I am, so we can discuss matters calmly and irrationally.

When I began researching the lives and myths of Pocahontas and Attakulakula in London I found such a morass of lies and of important truths untold, I realised that there was no way I could present a counter-narrative, even on the most elemental level. There are many interesting facts, however, which I've uncovered in preparation for this work, all the more interesting because of the method and substance by which they have been covered. Some of them may help you through the four-point space of dreams and tricks which I've prepared.

The story of Pocahontas as written by her husband, John Rolfe, was taken whole-cloth from a book by Richard Hakluyt, published in London in 1603. Hakluyt's book, however, told the story with a heroic crusader captain and a beautiful Arab princess as the two characters. Hakluyt himself moved to Virginia later on, and Rolfe may have known him there. The story in both books is about an English captain whose life is saved by the princess, but in Rolfe's version the captain was John Smith. The myth of Pocahontas and John Smith became an important operant in the construction of America, and had its counterparts all over the hemisphere. In Brazil the story is told about a woman named Iragema; in Mexico, Malinche.

But John Rolfe determined to make it real, to participate personally in the myth. He brought Pocahontas to London, had her re-named 'Lady Rebecca', and had a child by her (John Rolfe Jr). The name by which she was known back home was 'Matoaka', so we may suppose that the change from 'Pocahontas' to 'Rebecca' was of no great concern to her. (The dialect of the Cherokee language that she spoke had no 'L's, so she would have said, "Mi nahmi issi Rahdy Ribbeccah".)

She died on the Thames, on her way home, but anyway, the river by which she had played as a child had already been re-named the 'James', in that 'Virgin Forest' called 'Virginia'.

Let the Little Carpenter be your spiritual guide, as he is the guardian of these trashy dime-novel treasures I've laid out. In his language he is known as Attakulakula, but his nick-name was 'The Fixer'. He was a guy who attempted to bring together society's disparate

elements, disputing factions and potentially profitable trade undertakings. His nick-name was mis-translated as the 'Little Carpenter', but as one of our official delegates to the Royal Court in 1730, he is listed on the Treaty as 'Colonna', which was his military title (corresponding to 'Captain').

He was a very personal man, and his unbending loyalty to friends ultimately brought him isolation in the desperate times of war. Even when fighting the British he protected the lives of his British friends. What did he think of London in 1730? Where did he go, and what museums did he visit? Did he see any plays — *The Tempest*, perhaps? He called London the 'Pigeon Place'. (We did our own re-naming.)

The Treaty of 1730 between England and the Cherokee Nation was of constant importance to us. We fought with England against the colonists, which brought us grief. In the Second World War young Cherokee men went to fight with England in honour of that treaty, and there is still told around campfires the prophecy that some day men in red coats will come from across the sea to help us.

We have loved England, and especially become enthralled with writing. By 1820 we had our own newspaper, written in our own newly-devised alphabet, and of course, some missionary promptly translated the King James version of the Bible, the first book written in Cherokee.

I should have written more about art; about its strange importance to history and to society's knowledge and ways of knowing. Oh, I *wish* I could cease being such a savage. My intention like Attakulakula's, is always to be a person in the world: the entire world as it is. That was the Cherokee reality before the enclosure. The objects here are not mine or yours; they are ours. My great-great-grandfather knew King George, and Father knew Lloyd George.

All that we know we know by direct action — such as a bee-sting — or by metaphor. Language is metaphor, as much as are dreams. My artwork is also metaphor, but not in a simple pictorial way. The material, the actual objects that I change, carry their own complexities. I always intend the most complex changes and constructions possible. Then, in showing the work publicly, a different and very specific metaphoric language attaches to it.

This is what we must be aware of most. You have some ideas from reading this what my intentions are. But what are your intentions? I've tried to present a combination of objects, ideas, facts, and of combinations themselves, with a kind of Brechtian (or Coyote-ian) directness, to see if I could address your intentions. Certainly, as you must see by the choice and arrangement of the work, I do not mean to attack

or confuse you; but don't forget — you once also found the metaphor of our cardinal points, of four elements, of four humours, useful. You once knew that space is made by objects, and that as we move between and interact with objects we are formed. We *are* from the past, but we echo and reverberate in the present. What a responsibility! It is necessary that, with great urgency, we all speak well, and listen well. We, you and I, must remember everything. We must especially remember those things we never knew. Obviously that process cannot begin with longer lists of facts. It needs newer, and much more complex, kinds of metaphors. Perhaps we must trust confusion more, for a while, and be deeply suspicious of simple stories, simple acts.

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