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On Reading Anew: Native Communications Systems And Scholarly Literacy

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*The Networked Wilderness:
Communicating in Early New
England* by Matt Cohen.
Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2010. Pp. 296.
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The proliferation of digital databases over the past decade has been a windfall for early Americanists who now find themselves with convenient and near instantaneous access to a wide range of printed material from the colonial era. And yet, although this access has doubtless simplified, if not revolutionized, basic research for scholars around the world, it has raised new sets of issues while leaving other, long-standing ones unresolved. New methodological questions raised by the era of digital scholarship include how cataloguing and acquisition strategies, information systems, and searchable text transform our reading practices, and what the impact of these transformed practices is on the production of knowledge—both within the academy and without. Put another way, we might ask how networks of texts, keywords, and genres reshape the geography of archival work. A more long-standing question—one that all scholars and teachers of early colonial America must eventually confront—concerns the status of Native American literatures in a field where digital resources have multiplied the numbers and kinds of texts available for us to read. This question requires us to confront what we mean by literature, what we envision as Native, and how we imagine Native literatures to interact or engage with European literary traditions. Such questions resonate through departmental hallways, at

conferences, in scholarly books, and in the classroom, but as pragmatic as the discussions they produce might be, they can leave one wary of the familiar tropes and figures used to account for Native voices in early narratives. These include mediation, ventriloquism, orality, and literacy.

My own uneasiness about these conversations derives from a suspicion that they often only circle around a far more fundamental set of questions that lie at the heart of our work as scholars and teachers, and are exacerbated by the turn to digital media: What do we do when the historical record isn't legible in the way that we've been trained to read? When our own literacy is itself at stake? At its most ambitious, these are the problems that interdisciplinary work attempts to unfold: bringing disparate analytic and reading practices to bear on one another in order to make legible what has not only previously been illegible, but has often, in fact, been invisible. This is the site where Matt Cohen's *The Networked Wilderness* operates. By grounding his analysis in a deep understanding of digital and media studies, Cohen points us toward a new era of colonial, Indigenous, and Native American studies, revealing new materials that emerge from familiar sources. In doing so, he asks that we "alter our relationship to those sources" (128). In return, he trains us how to read anew.

The Networked Wilderness will appeal to a broad range of scholars in the fields of book history, early American, Indigenous, Native American, and digital/media studies. Cohen's key insight is to bring these fields into productive conversation and to imagine how their intersection will shape future scholarship for each. More importantly, rather than subordinating Native American and Indigenous studies to these other fields, Cohen demonstrates that close attention to Native communications radically remakes them. As his title suggests, Cohen's use of the term "Networked" signals a strategy that courts a certain kind of deliberate anachronism rather than avoiding it. But where such anachronism can lead to confusion, internal paradox, and failure if deployed haphazardly, Cohen's deft approach to trans-historical analysis opens the field in suggestive ways. Indeed, *The Networked Wilderness* self-consciously bypasses the traditional print/orality binary that has framed so many past approaches to early Native literatures and, in so doing, produces an uncanny insight about the relation between colonial networks and our own digital world. He writes that "as we increasingly interact with and through new multimedia technologies in a polyglot, culturally diverse world, what the American Indians and the English were going through in the [seventeenth-century] northeastern woods may

seem eerily familiar” (2). In drawing these similarities, Cohen relies on performance event and communications systems rather than book or print as his primary units of analysis. This is not to say that he ignores print. On the contrary, Cohen brings a strong investment in book history to the table and pays careful attention to both the materiality and the signification of the printed page; his argument is firmly grounded in a history of print and of print traditions and is thus self-consciously limited to the period immediately prior to the arrival of the printing press to New England.

Cohen frames his argument by considering “what constitutes evidence in book history, and what [it] would . . . mean for the stories it tells to account for Native American representational systems” (11). To effect such a project, he imagines textuality broadly by representing publication as an “embodied act of information exchange” and thus insists on its “performative elements” (7) rather than on any intrinsic link to the printed page. Doing so opens the range of material that he addresses and reorients our notions of how to approach Anglo-Native encounters in the early seventeenth century. Thus, he considers a Native wolf trap that “yanked” William Bradford off his feet, Thomas Morton’s maypole, Roger Williams’s depictions of Narragansett messaging practices, the

modern-day Mashantucket Pequot Museum, and the monument to the old fort at Saybrook. But even as he points us toward this broad vision of publication, Cohen keeps drawing us back to the printed page and to the print history of these early encounters. In doing so, he offers us an elegant reconfiguration—or a relocation—of the field: his book helps us to rethink our relationship to the materials we study, as well as to the methods and afterlives of our analysis.

I use the term *relocation* because its dual valence has been helpful as I continue to think through the book. In one respect, it represents a relocation of our scholarly gaze to recognize new modes in which familiar texts signify. But it also carries a geographic—or spatial—resonance that maps onto Cohen’s vision of the network as a model for destabilizing the nation-based or even territory-based analytic framework of historiography. Thus, Cohen argues, it matters that we understand how Native Americans signify in Bradford’s writing, at Ma-re Mount, in London, and in Amsterdam; it matters that Native paths delineated their own spatial networks with their own political, economic, and military significations in New England; it matters that the Mashantucket Pequot Museum appropriates and relocates John Underhill’s engraving of the Pequot fort at Mystic into its own architectural structure;

and, finally, it matters that the remains of Fort Saybrook are not visible to us today—that they are, as Cohen puts it, a palimpsest of “architectural remains . . . of messages and of histories” (167). These things matter because they move us into an information and commercial exchange-based model of historiography that casts a skeptical eye on models based primarily on asymmetric and teleological representations of literacy and military superiority.

The Networked Wilderness is organized into four chapters, an introduction, and a coda. In chapter 1 (“Native Audiences”), Cohen displaces Morton’s maypole from the familiar narrative context characterized by Bradford, focusing instead on the interconnectedness of European and Native communications systems. In doing so, he draws attention to the maypole itself as a site of Anglo-Native communications, as well as to its narrative function in Morton’s *New English Canaan* (1637). His goal here is to demonstrate that Morton raised “issues of public communication and literacy in the northern settlements . . . to sketch out a conflict over information cultures and social power in early New England” (30). Such observations require us to refocus our field of vision so that rather than “valoriz[ing] one set of descriptions over another, ranking them by always controversial categories, we might instead privilege

how a description functions rather than how accurate it is” (43). Here and throughout the book, Cohen draws on the publication histories of his primary sources to guide his analysis and to offer compelling accounts of how those descriptions might function. Exciting as such possibilities are, however, the danger is that they demand a far more speculative historiographical approach than might at times be comfortable. And while there is such speculative tension in the book—especially early on—Cohen is self-aware about how this tension shapes the overall trajectory of his argument; the patient reader is well rewarded as the book’s theoretical sophistication continues to unfold in its second half.

Chapter 2 (“Good Noise from New England”) focuses on Edward Winslow’s race to Massasoit’s bedside in 1662, at a time when the Wampanoag sachem’s illness (and misreported death) threatened to upend Anglo-Native relations. Cohen reexamines Winslow’s treatment of Massasoit and helps us “rethink notions of technology—here medical technology—to emphasize its collaborative and communicative aspects rather than to argue for its inevitable, self-interpreting power” (66). Cohen tells an elegant story about reading and interpretation here, complete with diplomatic and political intrigue, questions of sovereignty, and a cure for constipation—all of which

reveal Winslow to be grappling with “the problem of how to portray the relationship between information . . . and social order” (89). In Cohen’s hands, the story is not one of English medical superiority so much as it is an object lesson in the complex signification networks and practices of Native communities, and of an English settler’s struggle to negotiate those networks in the Atlantic world. What is crucial for Cohen is not simply Winslow’s treatment of Massasoit, but that he circulated the narrative and cured his patient “in print . . . [to instruct] Englishmen how to act for American Indian audiences” (90). This complex interplay among representation, signification, and circulation shapes the trajectory of the book just as it has, Cohen argues, shaped the traditions of the field.

Chapter 3 (“Forests of Gestures”) considers Roger Williams as a “network builder who operated across the signaling systems of English and Indigenous polities” (92). It does so by taking up where the analysis of Winslow left off and reading Williams’s *A Key into the Language of America* (1643) as a communications system. That is to say, “instead of taking one publication event as its focus”—for example, the publication of the book itself in Europe—“it considers two: the depictions of Narragansett messaging practices within *A Key*, and *A Key* as a publication with a long afterlife” (94). Accounting for both

publication events opens *A Key* to a rich array of interpretive possibilities where Native agency becomes central to the text’s meaning and where Williams works to represent that agency for English audiences. Cohen’s attention to the dual “publication event” surrounding the *Key* encapsulates both *The Networked Wilderness*’s promise and its primary difficulty—namely, how are we to write (or speak) a unified history of early New England while focusing on the fractured, polyvocal nature of its communications systems? Not to be glib, but the deceptively simple answer that Cohen leads us to is that we shouldn’t. To be more precise, Cohen disrupts nation-, period-, and print-based historiographical models and reorganizes these around a more diffuse model of the network. Diffuse, but neither unclear nor incoherent. The stakes for Cohen could not be higher, and he takes his cue from Williams, whose “willingness to think systematically and spiritually, but also politically, as he looked at Native culture offers ways of rethinking the goals of studying the Native American past” (95).

While the full scope of his argument may not have been as evident in the first half of the book, the payoff comes here and in the remaining pages of *The Networked Wilderness*, where Morton, Winslow, Williams, and Underhill (in the final chapter) serve as more than mere objects of analysis. Rather, Cohen

remains attentive to how their narratives resonate through history and continue to frame approaches to the field four centuries later. By introducing a far more complex and nuanced reading of Native communications, Cohen reintroduces us to these familiar texts, and models reading practices that fundamentally alter the geographic and political spaces they inhabit. Through Williams, Cohen reveals the significance of his own historiographical project: he suggests that when it “comes to the question of Native audiences, Williams presents a crucial problem, requiring me to introduce a methodological wrinkle into the story of communications systems and social power that I have been telling. That wrinkle is, in a sense, a wrinkle in time, a beginning of a suggestion that . . . attention to colonial media is a transhistorical enterprise” (94).

What Cohen means by this “wrinkle in time” becomes clear in chapter 4 (“Multimedia Combat and the Pequot War”), which considers the implications of our contemporary storytelling practices—not only as a historiographical problem in an academic field but also “in the trajectory of Native-U.S. negotiations over sovereignty today” (133). Indeed, he goes on to critique the very discontinuity (between the academic and the political) implied in my previous sentence, suggesting that “scholarly detachment, in such a

political ecology, is not so much unethical as impossible” (134). If such statements underscore Cohen’s ethical stance toward the field, this chapter—concerning Underhill’s representation of the Pequot War—reorients the spatial model of networks implied in the book’s first three chapters toward the temporal (or transhistorical) networks that tie scholarship and storytelling to the past and future. Thus, Cohen closes his study by placing us in the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and uses “the museum’s emphasis on simulacra and multimedia to rethink the first accounts by William Bradford of Pilgrim conflicts with the local Native Americans” (135).

In all of this rethinking, Cohen identifies and applies a corrective to misreadings of Native technologies and communications systems—both in the early texts themselves and in the continued historiographical tradition. This is a task, as I alluded to at the beginning of this review, that trains us in new forms of literacy and in new approaches to texts. These new literacies ask that readers remain finely attuned to multiple modes of textual signification, and the payoff, in the context of early seventeenth-century New England, is enormous, given the mythological hold of Massachusetts’s early history in the modern United States. Once we recognize the wide array of Native communications systems

that operated in Colonial New England—and in the European texts that remain with us—we can't help but revisit our reading and teaching practices. What remains to be seen, then, is how portable these practices are. I do not mean that Cohen's analytic tools ought to be transported, wholesale, to other geographies, other texts, and other archives. Rather, I am curious about the extent to which this very particular local history carries outward—uncovering further communications networks in French Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Southwest United States, and the Canadian Pacific. How much are the models of publication event and of information exchange that we encounter in *The Networked Wilderness* tied to a specific local history of print and of theological debates? More broadly, is Cohen's model region specific or does it offer us an alternate view of how to understand regionalism? It should come as no surprise that I suspect the latter, so the issue that I am really interested in is how we translate such site-specific analytic frameworks and explore new networked histories.

The afterlife of Cohen's book is that reading for traces of communications networks will reconfigure analyses of European-Native encounters throughout the hemisphere and has the same potential for reconfiguring European-African

encounters, as well. Cohen has opened an important field of study that will resonate broadly across a number of disciplines. But taking one final glance back at New England, which is both the subject of *The Networked Wilderness* and my own scholarly home, I would argue that part of the book's success lies in the number of questions it leaves us with and in the number of touchstone moments and texts that I was hoping Cohen would get to: How are the texts published in the wake of the Antinomian controversy complicated by his reading of Underhill and the Pequot war? How do we read John Eliot's Indian bible in a networked wilderness? And perhaps most salient, given the canonical status of *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), as well as the interpenetrating networks of Native and English communications networks that shape the narrative, I couldn't help but wonder what Mary Rowlandson's networked wilderness looks like. These are the conversations that Cohen leads us to, and we will be working through them for years to come.

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