

SAM DURANT

SCENES FROM THE PILGRIM STORY: MYTHS, MASSACRES AND MONUMENTS

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Jeffrey Keough

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Lisa Tung

ON LEGITIMIZING THE BODY POLITIC: AMERICA'S FOUNDING MYTH RECONSIDERED

Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds

“You the white man are celebrating an anniversary. We the Wampanoags will help you celebrate in the concept of a beginning. It was the beginning of a new life for the Pilgrims. Now, 350 years later, it is the beginning of a new determination for the original American: the American Indian.”

— Wamsutta (Frank B.) James, *Suppressed Speech*

“Myth is history’s alter ego, accompanying it like a shadow wherever it goes: indeed, paradoxically, myth is the best measure of history’s own success.”

– F.R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Dissociation of the Past: Or How to Be(come) What One is No Longer*

THE ANNIVERSARY THAT Wamsutta James spoke of over thirty years ago¹ refers to the first Thanksgiving of 1621 that, according to popular American belief, had the Pilgrims sharing a bountiful harvest with friendly local Indians. As the perennial event marking the foundation of America's national heritage, the Pilgrims' landing in 1620 continues to be celebrated and memorialized across the nation, particularly in the town of Plymouth, Massachusetts where the Thanksgiving Day parade takes place every year. Indeed, retelling the story of the Separatist group's escape from religious persecution in England, followed by a brief sojourn in Holland, in anticipation of their long journey across the Atlantic Ocean, has become one of America's favorite pastimes. According to the myth, which has been immortalized throughout the annals of American history, when the Pilgrims arrived, "the Native people fed them and welcomed them, then the Indians promptly faded into the background and everyone lived happily ever after."²

In contrast, in 1970, the United American Indians of New England (UAIINE) declared Thanksgiving Day a National Day of Mourning to counter the mythological treatment of America's historical past by Pilgrim descendents. For good reasons, the often untold circumstances leading up to the first harvest, and the events succeeding thereafter, are not lost on the Wampanoag community because of the considerable struggles that they, and other Indians across the nation, still experience through the direct effect of policies designed to maintenance contemporary Indian life in the U.S. When drawing upon narratives written by the first Pilgrims, James' "Suppressed Speech" exposed the imperialistic overtones that accurately described the settlement of lands and the exploitation of Indigenous peoples through the violations of their freedom and human rights. By and large, James discloses how the Pilgrim myth reflects an orientation to the past that conflicts with the long historical memory endemic to American soil prior to colonization. Therefore, given that the myth originates from a political community comprised of immigrants, Pilgrim collective memory represents an American identity steeped in the patriotism of values and political institutions foreign to the original American: the American Indian.



National Day of Mourning Plaque,
Plymouth, MA

As a way of extending the critique James forged years ago in alliance with UAINE, contemporary artist Sam Durant offers a complex analysis of the historical utilization of American monuments and their myths with his recent project, *Scenes from the Pilgrim Story: Myths, Massacres and Monuments*, at Massachusetts College of Art. As one of the most visible examples of the institutionalization of history, American monuments generated by the heritage industry are often ossified constructions that, like a statue, are "polished up solely so as to be able to gleam back resplendently into the eyes of those that behold it."³ For that reason, Durant's exhibit operates as a type of revisionist social history that re-examines Indian-white relations constructed by those in power whom continue to invest, define, and put to work the Pilgrim Story in and around the town of Plymouth. For Durant, who grew up in Massachusetts not far from Plymouth Rock, monuments such as these seem to serve the primary purpose of justifying the conquest of Indigenous peoples by white settlers.⁴

Consequently, Durant's artistic practice often involves a critique of institutional hierarchies to disclose how monuments function as sites of memory that are "meaningful and legible only within the currencies which they were comprised."⁵ In a recent project titled *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.*, the artist demonstrates how the numerous monuments, markers, and memorials across the U.S. not only commemorate massacres of Indigenous peoples during the colonization of North America, but duly reflect the conflicts and violence representative of the formation of the republic.⁶ As one critic put it, "Durant supplies what's missing between the memorials: the Indian Wars that were also genocide."⁷ It is this aspect of Durant's projects that involves an interrogation of America's historical narratives to allow the Indigenous voice to be heard long enough for viewers to recognize the mythological constructions that are often touted as historical fact. By exploring the diversity of meanings and histories intrinsic to the Pilgrim myth, Durant demonstrates how subjects and objects are appropriated and historicized according to dominant political beliefs encompassing modern concepts of nation and ethnicity in America.



Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington D.C., 2005 (installation view, Paula Cooper Gallery, NY)

GENERALLY SPEAKING, the function of myth in contemporary society is to tell a story that highlights important boundaries that have been transgressed during times of transition, or a move from one phase to another. In the video projection titled *Making History (Plymouth National Wax Museum)*, the artist visited the museum and gathered materials to produce a Ken Burns-style documentary that re-creates a filmic tour of the museum. By combining still photographs of the dioramas with audio narratives that accompanied the scenes in the original exhibits, the Pilgrim Story is retold as a moving picture. According to Durant, the result is a story that proposes itself as an authentic documentary about the history of the Pilgrims, but "instead of seeing the legitimate archival materials (old sepia photographs, artifacts, actual locations, narrated voice-overs of first person accounts, and so forth) that would normally be employed in this type of film, viewers are presented with doubt inspiring wax museum scenes and dioramas in place of what should be proper, factual materials."⁸ For that reason, the normally invisible authority of history and documentary comes into question when viewers cannot ignore the contradictions made between the content (wax museum scenes) and form (documentary style) of the narrative being told. Durant interprets the abundance of such narratives in contemporary life with the claim that white America's understanding of Indians could be formed primarily by the long history of Hollywood Westerns that saturate the media. What these kinds of dramatizations, in fact, represent is the function of myth itself as a form of cultural production: myths separate a pre-historical world of a perennial and quasi-natural stability from the world of change in which we presently live.⁹



According to historian F.R. Ankersmit, the nature of myth requires that it be situated in a domain that is outside a civilization's historical time, or contemporary reality.¹⁰ As a result, the formation of a mythical past takes place outside the course of history and, simultaneously, becomes immune to historical re-interpretation. Durant's video is instrumental in showing how the Pilgrim Story adheres to these rules and, in the end, emerges as utterly ahistorical, or better suited for idealization rather than historical fact. The situation is made apparent by Durant's inclusion of the Indigenous perspective at the end of the same video when the screen fades to white and the text titled "National Day of Mourning" fills the space. As an annual tradition since 1970, the National Day of Mourning allows tribal peoples of New England a chance to mourn their ancestors, the genocide of their people, and the theft of their lands with a march through the historic district of Plymouth. Durant's acknowledgment of the traumatic memories held by Native people also points to the "forgetfulness" typical of celebrated myths. In particular, Pilgrim identity is dramatized into a story that associates the beginning of time with the year 1620. All that preceded that point in time is discarded and experience of the world is confined to a cultural and historical past that makes the myth work every year. As such, the history of Indigenous people's existence in America before 1620, including the traumatic events following that date, is unsuitable for a story that abandons reality on a regular basis in favor of yearning for a nostalgic past that is beyond time—or, dissociated into a sublime understanding of history.



Stills from *Making History (Plymouth National Wax Museum)*, 2006

IN ANOTHER PIECE titled *Pilgrims and Indians, Planting and Reaping, Learning and Teaching*, Durant has placed two scenes on either side of a sixteen-foot circular platform that is motorized and rotates continuously at a leisurely pace. On both sides of the eight-foot wall which bisects the moving platform, several figures and props are assembled to replicate two scenes that were on display at the Plymouth National Wax Museum. One scene depicts the English-speaking Indian, Squanto [Tisquantum], teaching the Pilgrims to fertilize their corn with fish to ensure a good harvest in the fall. As indicated by Durant, "this scene has served a centrally important role in the Pilgrim story; it acknowledges that, were it not for the help of sympathetic Indians, the Pilgrims would have perished soon after their arrival. According to the story, because of Squanto's help the Pilgrims reaped a bountiful harvest, making possible a feast that became the first Thanksgiving."¹¹ To be sure, the Pilgrims survived their first winter solely because they received tremendous aid from local Indians, particularly, Squanto and other members of the Wampanoag Confederacy. In his speech, Wamsutta James understandably searches for possible reasons why his ancestors helped the Pilgrims even after they realized the Pilgrims had robbed ancestral graves and stole corn and beans upon landing:

Massasoit, the great Sachem of the Wampanoag, knew these facts, yet he and his people welcomed and befriended the settlers of the Plimouth Plantation. Perhaps he did this because his tribe had been depleted by an epidemic. Or his knowledge of the harsh oncoming winter was the reason for his peaceful acceptance of these acts. This action by Massasoit was probably our biggest mistake. We, the Wampanoag, welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end; that before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a free people.¹²

Despite the humanitarian efforts extended to the Pilgrims, conflicts ensued over the immigrant group's desire to acquire more land as well as imposing repressive values that championed Christian beliefs through missionary efforts. In contrast to the friendly planting and reaping portrait with Squanto, the adjacent scene on the other side of the wall is attuned to the tyrannical features of the Pilgrim's progress because it depicts Captain Miles Standish beating an Indian with a club. The Indian man, Pecksuot, is on all fours, his face turned downward with tomahawk still in hand, while Standish hovers menacingly over him in triumph. According to Durant, "the scene had been removed from display [at the wax museum] in the 1970's for obvious reasons—it made Indian-Pilgrim relations



Pilgrims and Indians, Planting and Reaping, Learning and Teaching, 2006



all too clear."¹³ In fact, Durant reconstructed the scene based on a postcard he found in the museum's basement when conducting research. After arriving on the Mayflower, the English-born Standish served as military advisor to the Plymouth colony and led forces against neighboring Indian tribes that dared to challenge the colony's expansion. Durant's decision to confront viewers with historical facts such as colonialism and genocide reveals the true intentions behind the construction of the Pilgrim Story because the omissions are inevitably made for a reason. By overshadowing the existence of social and political formations in position before contact, the Pilgrim myth, instead, focuses on the immigrant group's desire for determining a democratic republic in the New World. In fact, it is precisely this aspect of the grand narrative that continues to inspire a type of filial piety in descendents whom often credit their forefathers with establishing one of the earliest examples of democracy in America with the signing of the Mayflower Compact.¹⁴

However, this particular orientation to the past reflects the deep-rooted collective memory that Pilgrim descendents cling to because the emergence of their identity was established in opposition to that of the Indian. As strangers to



the New World, the Pilgrims were faced with establishing the very foundation of their culture which, as the myth would have it, was based on ordering principles of nationality that had nothing to do with the original Native inhabitants. By abandoning origin and ethnicity as concepts for developing citizenship—or the right to have rights—the legitimizing power of the Pilgrim body politic was guaranteed by its own institutions for validity.¹⁵ Historical theorists have often described this transformative process as Western civilization's rationalization of the new phases it enters throughout history, i.e. revolutions, as if each new phase constitutes the birth of time yet again. However, this process also describes the ways in which societies disengage themselves from the past in order to kill a former identity by acquiring a pristine new one. Such episodes in the history of civilization always involve a movement of dissociation that will ordinarily manifest itself in what a civilization tends to mythologize.¹⁶ The tragedy of such episodes for the history of a civilization is paralleled by the traumatic loss felt by individuals who have to deal with suicides that societies (outside their own) commit. In this case, the trauma was most deftly felt by all of the Indians who had been living in the Northeast for thousands of years before the Pilgrim's landing.



Subject/Position/Object/Placement (Pilgrim Monuments: Massasoit, Metacomet and Plymouth Rock), 2006

IN DURANT'S THIRD installation titled, *Subject/Position/Object/Placement (Pilgrim Monuments: Massasoit, Metacomet and Plymouth Rock)*, a range of monuments are re-contextualized to address, both symbolically and geographically, the actual location of Pilgrim-related monuments and how they work. A fiberglass replica of the famed Plymouth Rock is placed on the floor with the date "1620" staring up at the viewer. Standing on the other side of the rock, opposite the viewer, is the wax figure of an Indian male steadily gazing into space with his back to the viewer, perhaps referencing the Massasoit monument. Included in the scene is a freestanding sign dedicated to Metacomet (aka King Philip) and King Philip's War (1675–1676), with a transcription of the actual text from the plaque located in Post Office Square in Plymouth, MA. In considering the placement of his own replicas in the gallery space, Durant was well aware of the fanfare surrounding the actual objects and the power invested in them to define and put to work the important aspects of the Pilgrim myth. As one

of the most popular destinations for visitors every year, the town of Plymouth advertises each of these monuments on a tour as “must see” attractions situated strategically in the historic district. At the actual site of Plymouth Rock, viewers stand on the sidewalk under a canopy to look at the date “1620” through an iron fence while the harbor offers a view of the expanding Atlantic. If one were to imagine turning around, as if at the actual site, they would see Cole's Hill rising in the distance. As the former location of the Plymouth National Wax Museum (now closed), Cole's Hill is also the place where the bronze statue of Massasoit [Ousamequin], Great Sachem of the Wampanoag and father to Metacomet, was positioned by the town of Plymouth. Recently, UAIINE also installed a large boulder with a set plaque near the Massasoit statue. Their text reads “National Day of Mourning” and contains the exact words which are displayed at the end of Durant's video projection.

Undeniably, radical challenges to the Pilgrim myth have been courageously carried out by UAIINE members with demonstrations and protests taking place in Plymouth during the Thanksgiving Day parade. In various ways, Durant extends this type of protest to the gallery space by interrogating the myth with Indigenous perspectives that offer a counter-history. The plaque placed next to the Plymouth Rock replica brings the message home, as it were, because it relates the frustrating events that compelled the Wampanoag community, and other tribes, to battle English colonists in what is known as King Philip's War. Much like the “National Day of Mourning” plaque, the “Metacomet” text reveals traumatic events and exposes the intractable violence inflicted upon the Sachem's body after he was killed. The Wampanoag leader was murdered in Rhode Island, August 1676, and his body mutilated—with one hand sent to Boston and the other to England—while his head was impaled on a pike for nearly 20 years in Plymouth's town square. In Durant's opinion, his head was treated as “another monument among the many that have been erected to the Pilgrim's triumph, but virtually unknown for obvious reasons.”¹⁷

On December 22, 1881, Mark Twain addressed a crowd of proud Pilgrim descendents at the first annual dinner of Philadelphia's New England Society because the group wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the landing at Plymouth Rock. As keynote speaker, Twain was to follow other speakers who paid homage to the Pilgrim Fathers, whom they dubbed the “true” America, because, apparently, they were the legitimate heirs to the nation's places of privilege and the guardians of American culture across the dislocations of space and time.¹⁸

However, when Twain spoke, he was alone in pointing out that the Society's version of America took no notice of all the other native sons and daughters, namely, Native Americans, slaves, women, and Others. In fact, Twain's speech started out like this:

I rise to protest. I have kept still for years, but really I think there is no sufficient justification for this sort of thing. What do you want to celebrate those people for?—those ancestors of yours of 1620—the Mayflower tribe, I mean.¹⁹

In much the same way as Wamsutta James in his own speech, Twain proceeds to admonish the myth of the Pilgrim's progress and pleads with the crowd to disband their society because they, obviously, perpetuated ancestral superstitions. In many profound ways, Twain's speech anticipates the type of revisionist social history practiced today which, along with examining canonical myths, provides a challenge to long held assumptions about what comprises "American-ness." In truth, what becomes apparent in the critique put forth by Durant's project (and the speeches by James and Twain) is that the Pilgrim myth is based on self-prescribed principles constituting an American national identity originating within a body politic shaped by abstract, universal values.²⁰ For reasons stemming from their immigrant status in the U.S., and the imperialistic treatment of Native inhabitants, they dissociate themselves from the historical past by neutralizing all frames of reference for belonging and memory. Consequently, the success of the Pilgrim myth lies in the repudiation of America's past because the Indian's prior existence in the New World threatens the legitimizing power of the Pilgrim body politic. As demonstrated by the suppression of James' speech, Pilgrim descendents are still trying to silence Native people today. However, thirty years ago, James addressed them:

Although time has drained our culture, and our language is almost extinct, we the Wampanoags still walk the lands of Massachusetts. We may be fragmented, we may be confused. Many years have passed since we have been a people together. Our lands were invaded. We fought as hard to keep our land as you the whites did to take our land away from us. We were conquered, we became the American prisoners of war in many cases, and wards of the United States Government, until only recently. Our spirit refuses to die... We are determined, and our presence here this evening is living testimony that this is only the beginning of the American Indian, particularly the Wampanoag, to regain the position in this country that is rightfully ours.²¹

notes

1. Wamsutta (Frank B.) James, "Suppressed Speech" to have been delivered at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts banquet celebrating the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, Plymouth, Massachusetts, September 10, 1970. <http://www.uaine.org/wmsuta.htm>.
2. United American Indians of New England, "Why Native People Protest in Plymouth," December 3, 1998. <http://www.workers.org/ww/1998/uaine1203.php>.
3. Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, "Social History as 'Sites of Memory'? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2006) 893.
4. Sam Durant, interview by John LeKay, "Sculpture: Sam Durant," *Heyoka Magazine* 3 (Winter 2006).
5. Similarly, in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, 63), John Tagg examines the conjuncture of state institutions with specific forms of photographic practice to determine the diversity in meanings of photography.
6. Sam Durant, *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.* (New York: Paula Cooper Gallery, 2005) 5.
7. Jerry Saltz, "Art & Photo: Blood Monument," *The Village Voice*, October 14, 2005.
8. Sam Durant, "General Statement: Scenes from the Pilgrim Story: Myths, Massacres and Monuments," unpublished artist statement, 2006.
9. F.R. Ankersmit, "The Sublime Dissociation of the Past: Or How to Be(come) What One Is Not Longer," *History and Theory* 40, no. 3 (October 2001) 319.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Durant, "General Statement"
12. James, <http://www.uaine.org/wmsuta.htm>.
13. Durant, "General Statement"
14. The Mayflower Compact was signed while still aboard the vessel to quell threats of mutiny. The document sealed an agreement between passengers of the *Mayflower* to create a "civil body politic." The agreement is often considered a forerunner of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
15. Dan Diner, "Nation, Migration, and Memory: On Historical Concepts of Citizenship," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 4, issue 3 (January 1998) 300–302.
16. Ankersmit, "The Sublime Dissociation of the Past," 322.
17. Durant, "General Statement." An accompanying didactic panel outlines some aspects of King Philip's war, with particular emphasis made toward explaining how formative the war was for concepts characterizing American national identity, culture, and policy in contemporary life. In order to better understand the complex issues that the artworks address, a reading area is also provided with a selection of books, texts, and research materials that were used in the development of the works. See Appendix IV, 68–71.
18. University of Virginia Library: Electronic Text Center, "Plymouth Rock and the Pilgrims," <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/onstage/pilgrims.html>.
19. Mark Twain, "I Rise to Protest," *Mark Twain Speeches* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910) 17–24.
20. Diner, "Nation, Migration, and Memory," 300–301.
21. James, <http://www.uaine.org/wmsuta.htm>.

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