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A Staged Encounter: French Meeting Timucua in Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues

FRANK LESTRINGANT

The rituals and ceremonials were not the decorative covering of the alliances; they were its sinews.

—Richard White, *The Middle Ground* (1991)

In 1591, a quarter of a century after the destruction of the French settlements in Florida by the Spanish *adelantado* Menéndez de Avilés in autumn of 1565, there appeared in Frankfurt the second volume of Théodore de Bry's *Great Voyages*, the *Brevis Narratio* of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues.¹ It included an extraordinary series of forty-two copper-plates depicting the Timucua Native Americans² engaged in a variety of everyday activities, both in peacetime and war. The space represented in these engravings is neither neutral nor objective. It is, rather, a "theater," in the sense the word often held in the sixteenth century—that is, a kind of visualization device, but one with a bias. This compendium of texts and engravings places the iconography face-to-face with the texts it accompanies, and with which it maintains a complex relationship that cannot simply be reduced to an illustrative role.

By 1591, however, this representation had already become anachronistic. Reviving colonial activities was no longer possible, since the territories were now occupied by Spain, and the French monarchy had in the meantime been torn apart by the Wars of Religion. If, indeed, such a revival were conceivable within the hierarchy of Europe, it could only be accomplished under the auspices of the Protestant powers, with England and Holland foremost among them. To be sure, De Bry's editorial endeavor cannot be reduced to a geopolitical stratagem, though it certainly is that on some level. Rather, it corresponds more particularly to a kind of symbolic vision. This collection of sumptuously illustrated books—whose publication extended

from 1590 to 1634—began in its first two volumes (*Virginia* in 1590 by Hariot and *Florida* in 1591 by Le Moyne) by exalting the indigenous population, who not only lived an Edenic existence, but moreover appeared wholly prepared to convert and entirely amenable to the suasions of the Christian religion. It is utterly astounding that these first two volumes show almost nothing of the colonial downfall and its causes—or, what should more realistically be called the absolute, unqualified disaster, which, in both cases, concluded the colonial venture. Anachronism abounds in the form of nostalgia.

The Column of Ribault

My intention is to examine plate VIII in particular, which depicts the Timucua, in the presence of Laudonnière, prostrating themselves before the column that had been erected three years earlier by Jean Ribault. The caption reads “*Columnam à Praefecto prima navigatione locatam venerantur Floridenses*” (“The Floridians venerate the column erected by the captain at the time of the first expedition”).³ The negotiation between Europeans and Native Americans here operates according to the model of *mimicry*, in which each adapts himself to the code of the other, without, however, fully understanding it. We find ourselves in the midst of an intermediate space, “a zone of intersection where all culturally determined meanings are put in question by an unresolved—indeed, entirely unresolvable—hybridity.”⁴ On the face of it, the meaning behind this engraving is simple. It concerns the second expedition of the Huguenots in Florida, where, on June 25, 1564, the French (under the command of René de Laudonnière) found the *fleurs-de-lys*–ornamented column planted two years before by Jean Ribault and the previous expedition at the mouth of the May River (today known as the St. Johns River).

The Timucua revered Ribault’s column, kneeling before it and embracing it with a religious respect and placing gifts—baskets of millet and fruit, boxes filled with ears of corn, calabash gourds, bows and quivers—at its base. In the *Lettre venant de la Floride*, published in 1565, an anonymous colonist observes: “We remained in the space near the aforementioned boundary marker for half an hour as the savages brought countless laurel wreathes and libations, approaching and embracing the column and crying out *Tymangoua*, as if by doing so they might have victory against their enemies (who are named *Tymangoua*), and crying out that the Sun had sent his brother, the lord Laudonnière, in order to take revenge on their enemies.”⁵

At first glance, the artwork engraved by De Bry (following the text of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues) emphatically displays a central element: the column, covered with *fleurs-de-lys*, swathed in garlands, and adored by the kneeling Native Americans. Plainly, this plate offers up a tableau of the glory of French colonization, showing the European foreigners venerated as gods, and the column—a proprietary emblem—becoming for the Native Americans a cult-object. This column, or as the *Lettre venant de la Floride* calls it, this “marker of white stone, on which the arms of the King are

engraved,”⁶ corresponds precisely to what in Portuguese is termed a *padrão*, something that is simultaneously a mile-marker along the path of discovery and conquest, and a sign of sovereignty in the territories claimed in the name of the king.⁷

All of this seems quite obvious, and the intention of the artist appears to be unambiguous. The offering scene at the column represents the legitimacy of the conquest, a conquest approved even by those who have been conquered, and who themselves display in remarkable fashion the symptoms of voluntary servitude. The Timucua of Florida welcome their new masters with adoring gestures. Laudonnière’s mustache seems almost to tremble in pleasure. And there appears to be a perfect accord between Laudonnière and King Atoré, the son of Saturiwa (Satouriona as he is named in French chronicles). In his *Histoire universelle*, Agrippa d’Aubigné draws this hasty and exaggeratedly optimistic conclusion: “In no time at all, the French were esteemed as gods in this country. And because the fires of heaven or its extreme heat had set the country ablaze that year, the Savages imputed this to [the French] because of their artillery, learning thus to honor the French, to their advantage.”⁸

The image was thus a propagandizing icon and it assumed on that account a particular importance. What is more, it is the only image from the entire series for which we possess a manuscript version, painted in delicate colors, and preserved today in the New York Public Library. In the series of engravings from Le Moyne’s text, it is situated at the juncture of the two expeditions: the expedition of Jean Ribault, narrated in the first seven plates, all of which have a topographical character with a nautical foreground, and that of Laudonnière, whose various activities, intermingled with scenes from Native American life, serve as the subject of plates VIII through XLII. I have already suggested that the engraving was *itself* the performance of a facial ritual, reopening a space for colonization that had been abandoned for quite some time. A brief summary of the concept will prove helpful at this point.⁹

A Facial Ritual

Among the ancient Romans, as Georges Dumézil has shown, the facial rite, dedicated to relations with foreigners, functioned symbolically to open up a space for an ensuing political or military action.¹⁰ The facial ritual included three elements, all of which are found in this engraving: inauguration, repetition, and anticipation. In the first place, the column delimits a threshold and establishes a space for roaming about and colonizing the land. In the second place, the reverence offered up at the column associates renewal with commemoration. This *repetitio rerum* not only commemorates the initial conquest, but also recalls—and at the same time perpetuates—the King of France’s right to the territory. Finally, the ritual is an anticipation of forthcoming events—a kind of *recitatio*—in that it is meant to prepare for the establishment of a New France on the soil of the Americas. Following upon Canadian New France and France Antarctique in Brazil, Floridian New France would

now have its chance—a chance that, despite all attempts to avert disaster, would prove to be just as ephemeral as the preceding ventures.

Immediately after the fecial rite, the space that it authorized was seized and held militarily. Indeed, it was important to avoid the previous expedition's slow drift toward failure. Creating a symbolic space was of no use if such a space were allowed to slip beyond all control. It must be strongly secured.

In both the narrative sequence and the chronology of the expedition, the construction of Fort Caroline, named in honor of Charles IX, immediately followed the scene at the column. Indeed, in the present state of archaeological research, it was on the banks of the present-day St. Johns River (doubtless at St. Johns Bluff)¹¹, in the area near the column, that the new fort was established on June 30, 1564. It was as if such a favorable omen could not be allowed to escape, as if the column the Native Americans venerated should serve both as palladium and cornerstone of the establishment brought forth from the ashes after two years of neglect. The second expedition arrived at an end precisely where the first had begun, just as Fort Caroline, in a kind of anagram, reinstated the name of Charlesfort, the establishment founded by Ribault two years before on what is now Parris Island.¹²

To all appearances, things had come full circle. But there could not really be a return, pure and simple, to the initial set of circumstances. Knowledge of the terrain and an alliance with the indigenous population were assets that Ribault had not possessed. The best guarantee of success—from which Laudonnière, however, did not manage to profit—was the perduring quality of the symbol (in the strong sense of that term), which the Native Americans had known to maintain in the absence of the French and in the wait for their return. Without traversing all the coastal waterways one by one, it was on the banks of the very river where Ribault had landed that Fort Caroline was founded, as if at the threshold of the newly-reopened territory. The fort would become the crux of this territory.

Decentering

The preceding analysis nevertheless seems insufficient, to the extent that it presents only one side—the side of the colonizer, newly arrived by sea from far-off Europe—while neglecting the opposing point of view, namely, that of the Native American. And yet it is in fact the latter point of view that controlled the staging of the performance, at least in the beginning.

Of course, this indigenous perspective remains conjectural. We possess no direct testimony about it, in contrast with the observations about Mexico and to a lesser extent Peru, where the indigenous codices compiled immediately following the conquest comprise a significant collection. In order to attend to the words and gestures of the Timucua, or—in other words—to understand them and to see them, they must be mediated for us through texts and images which form a sort of screen. Furthermore, these texts and images all come from a time well after the events they

describe—months, years, and even decades in the case of De Bry’s engraved plates. Any analysis therefore must attempt to determine, on the one hand, what simply relates to the empirical anthropological situation, and on the other hand, what must be retrieved through a variety of cultural filters (e.g. the biblical references to idolatry and the assumed superiority of all things Occidental and Christian); through fixed, canonical aesthetic frameworks (e.g. mannerism); and according to particular ideological ends (e.g. nostalgia for a golden age, the dream of a harmonious reconciliation between the two separated halves of humanity). An analysis also must take account of this illustration’s location within the interior of a compendium that appears to be seamless and coherent, but actually has a composite origin, as William C. Sturtevant has shown.¹³

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the scene of adoration at the column is in fact more complex than it appears at first glance.¹⁴ The octagonal column is decentered toward the left, so that it does not actually serve as the axis of symmetry for the composition. The exact middle of the engraving actually corresponds to the empty space inscribed between the column and the giant figure of King Atoré—made even taller by a coil of hair crowned with two trailing raccoon tails—which dwarfs the figure of Laudonnière who stands at his side, frail in comparison. This central space partitions the composition into two equal sections and divides the two parts into a diptych. On one side there is the column on a hillock covered in gifts and offerings, with a backdrop of Native Americans kneeling in two rows. On the other side there is the diplomatic *pas de deux* the two principals—the colossal Atoré and the slight Laudonnière—seem to dance. This empty space in the center of the composition is crossed only by the muscled arm and raised, open hand—complete with long, filed nails—of the chief of the Timucua, who seems to be both pointing to the column and blessing it. Accordingly, Atoré, the son of Paraousti, the friend of the French, links the two worlds: the realm of the Amerindian idolaters and that of the Huguenots, who are slightly surprised and distant, although amenable to flattery in the final analysis. Presented in full-face, Atoré dominates this strange ceremony with his height and grand stature. In a gesture simultaneously friendly and protective, he lays his left hand on the French captain’s shoulder. The Latin text describes him as “a very comely man, wise, honest, robust and of a great size, surpassing by a foot and a half our tallest men” (*formosus admodum, prudens, honestus, robustus et procerae admodum staturae, nostrorum hominum maximos sesquipedas superans*).

The curious composition of the tableau, which seems to bring three different scales of grandeur into coexistence, elevates the Indian chief at the expense of his kneeling and adoring subjects, and—to a lesser extent—at the expense of the French, who have been thrust to the left edge of the frame with their assortment of jumbled, tawdry arms. The lack of proportion between the different figures induces a kind of revolving perspective, with the spectator’s eye following Atoré’s raised arm in the direction of the fleur-de-lys-encrusted column on the left, before pivoting to the

right and following his gaze toward Laudonnière and the French escort, armed with arquebuses and halberds. Indeed, it is the Native American chief who arranges the ceremony and directs its progression. He is the one, moreover, who endows it with meaning, at least at the primary level of interpretation. He possesses the imperious and didactic gesture of the “one who reveals” that is so often seen in certain Christian paintings, most notably in the *Quattrocento* retables representing the Virgin and Child or the Passion of Christ.¹⁵ Master of ceremonies and director, he is also the great interpreter, the one who pulls the European political symbol in the direction the Amerindian sacred. Amplified by his grand size and exalted depiction in the scene, his gesture of invitation summons the visitors from faraway lands to the ceremony; indeed, it very nearly compels them, as they find that they are brought into the midst of this unusual act of tribute, almost despite themselves. It is this sense of unease that gives rise to the uncertainty of the representation, along with the spectator’s hesitation in assigning it meaning. What manner of invisible sacred presence does Atoré’s outstretched arm, his raised hand, designate? What sort of parodic religious ceremony does he invite his captive audience to attend—an audience doubly captive, both to his speech and to the ceremonial circle which his gesture obliges them to enter, and which the composition itself evokes?

The different accounts of the event reveal that the Native Americans’ worship of the column also was directed to Laudonnière, the head of the French expedition. According to the anonymous *Lettre* of 1565, the Timucua “flattered him just as one might adore an image.”¹⁶ Here, one recognizes a typically Protestant vocabulary and tone. The adoration of images—that is, idolatry—was one of the principle grievances nurtured by the Huguenots against the Catholics. It was the horror of idolatry that lies behind the waves of iconoclasm that affected the northwest regions of the kingdom of France, from Flanders to Normandy, and also Languedoc.

In the *Histoire notable de la Floride*, Laudonnière acknowledges that he played along with this game. Through calculation and diplomacy, this Protestant enemy of all idolatry submits himself to the indigenous ritual. He himself kisses the column erected by his predecessor: “a thing we did not wish to refuse, having as our aim to attract them more and more in the direction of friendship.”¹⁷ The Protestant leader’s self-betrayal is remarkable, indeed; but does he really have any choice? In this initial phase of colonization, it was important to avoid offending one’s commercial partner and military ally by inappropriate remarks or unbecoming conduct. In any case, for a Huguenot of the sixteenth century, the idolatry of the Native Americans, who were ignorant of Scripture, was infinitely more tolerable than the idolatry of Catholics, those false Christians who mocked the teaching of Christ and profaned his holy name by uniting it to the heretical rituals of ancient paganism.

This strange tolerance for the vain superstition of the indigenous population is plainly not disinterested. But the complicity perhaps runs even deeper than it first appears. This so-called diplomatic ruse served in this instance to conceal a sacred gesture, the vestige of a ritual whose significance and meaning the Calvinist

Laudonnière could not possibly acknowledge, and which he preferred to reject in order to believe and participate fully in the other, indigenous ritual. It was easy to blame the pagan, who lent legitimacy to a suspect practice; idolatry was a very convenient camouflage while he attended to his little arrangements with Fate. There is a *Nicodemite* hiding in every ethnologist, and Laudonnière was no exception to the rule. Indeed, later in his life, he will move from “ethnological Nicodemism” to straightforward Nicodemism, when, after the St. Bartholomew’s Night Massacre, having indisputably abjured the Reformation, he continued very quietly to frequent the French court. When he died on July 24, 1574 at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, his death was inscribed in the Catholic registers.¹⁸

A Negotiation

The negotiation between Europeans and “savages” thus regulates itself according to the model of *mimicry*, since each party adapts itself to the conventions of the other, without, however, entirely understanding them. We find ourselves here in the space described by Homi Bhabha, in a zone of intersection between two cultures, governed by “an unresolved and entirely unresolvable hybridity.”¹⁹ The Timucua transform the boundary marker encrusted with fleurs-de-lys into an object of worship; they adorn it with garlands of vines and flowers, lay before it baskets of fruit, press themselves against it and embrace it while crying out the name of their enemies, whom they thereby assure themselves of defeating. In return, the Huguenot captain accepts the kinship of the sun awarded him by the Timucua, takes care not to speak of conversion to the Christian faith, and solemnly promises to be the ally of such a hospitable people.

However, one cannot possibly reduce this spectacle of double appropriation to the simple motives of interest or calculation. The Amerindian appropriates the symbol of the European, all the while disrupting its meaning.²⁰ The European accommodates himself to this symbolic re-appropriation to the extent that it has prepared a position for him within the other’s domain—a position of which he eventually intends to make good use. In this way, then, two scenes mutually interpenetrate and enclose each other in a playful concurrence in which each actor is simultaneously the master of the game and a docile subordinate. Most fascinating of all is that, as each plays his own part, the result is a symphony without any apparent discordance and without a false note—a controlled ensemble (but controlled by whom?) of which Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues’ engraving provides a fairly accurate notion, however unfaithfully it may correspond to the ethnographic reality.

The Le Moyne-De Bry engraving superbly conveys the ambivalence of the relationships established between the civilized and the “savage” in the beginning. In exemplary fashion, this engraving sets the stage for an encounter in which two symbolic structures fit together and overlap, without the slightest appearance of conflict. Of course, this could be nothing more than a transitory state; relations

between the Timucua and the French quickly degenerated as the weeks and months went by. The economic pressure of the French newcomers depending upon the indigenous peoples and their meager stores of grain; the risky political alliance constructed by René de Laudonnière, who soon broke with the tribes he had first encountered in favor of their fiercer Timucua enemies living further inland; and finally the impatience of Laudonnière's men, zealous for a quick and easy profit and preferring a strategy of commerce raiding on the coast of Cuba to agriculture; all these elements together precipitated a crisis for the colonial establishment and helped to bring about its destruction.²¹

Notes

¹ The Belgian graphic artist Theodore de Bry settled in Frankfurt where in 1590 he initiated the "De Bry collection of voyages" to America, Africa, and Asia, all illustrated with copper engravings. The second volume of "Great Voyages" was devoted to Florida. In addition to the accounts of Jean Ribault and René de Laudonnière, it contained a series of forty-two engravings based on drawings and watercolours executed on location by Jacques Le Moyne de Mourgues (c. 1533-1588), a Protestant painter from Dieppe.

² The Timucuan under Chief Saturiwa met the French at the mouth of the St. Johns River in 1562. One of a number of Timucua-speaking tribes who inhabited present day central and north Florida and southeast Georgia, they were in the final stage of a culture that had remained essentially unchanged for more than 1,000 years.

³ Jacques Le Moyne de Mourgues, *Indorum Floridam Provinciam inhabitantium Eicones* (Frankfurt: for Théodore de Bry, 1591), plate VIII.

⁴ For an adaptation of the concept of mimicry (or mimikry) in ethnographic exchange, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.

⁵ Anonymous, *Coppie d'une Lettre venant de la Floride envoyée à Rouen, et depuis au Seigneur d'Everon: ensemble le plan du fort que les François y ont fait* (Paris: for Vincent Norment and Jeanne Bruneau, in Neufve Nostre Dame street, at "l'Image Saint Jean l'Evangeliste," 1565), f. A iv r^o-v^o. This *unicum* is preserved at the John Carter Brown Library of Providence, Rhode Island, under the call number E565 C7851 F.

⁶ *Coppie d'une Lettre*, f. A iv r^o.

⁷ On this point, see Eric Axelson, *Congo to Cape: Early Portuguese Explorers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 51-55, 114-144, 149-156, 158-173, where all the pillars erected by Diogo Cão and Bartolomeu Dias are discussed (illustrations facing p. 113); *South-East Africa, 1488-1530* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1940) especially 172-181, Appendix III:

“The Discovery of the padrao of S. Gregorio erected by Bartolomeu Dias”; *Portuguese in South-East Africa, 1488-1600* (Johannesburg: C. Struik, “Published on behalf of the Ernest Oppenheimer Institute of Portuguese Studies of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,” 1973), 8-10 & *passim*. For the case of Ceylon, see Geneviève Bouchon, “Premières reconnaissances portugaises dans l’océan Indien: l’inscription de Colombo (1501) et la recherche de Ceylan,” in *Revue d’Histoire maritime* n° 4: “Rivalités maritimes européennes (XVIe-XIXe siècles),” Paris, Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2005, 9-50.

⁸ Agrippa d’Aubigné, *Histoire universelle*, IV, XX, ed. André Thierry, t. II (Geneva: Droz, 1982), 342.

⁹ For this argument, which was inspired by Michel de Certeau, I return to my book *Livre des îles: Atlas et récits insulaires de la Genèse à Jules Verne* (Geneva: Droz, 2002), ch. VI, 203-207.

¹⁰ Georges Dumézil, *Idées romaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), “Notions,” III. *Ius fetiale*, 61-80. This is a notion taken up and glossed by Michel de Certeau in *L’Invention du quotidien. I. Arts de faire* (Paris: UGE, “10/18,” 1980), 218-221; published in English as *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 124-126.

¹¹ Paul Hulton, et. al, *The Work of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues: A Huguenot Artist in France, Florida, and England* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1977), vol. I, 205.

¹² The location of this first colony was discovered at the time of the excavations conducted by Chester B. DePratter and Stanley South on the site of Fort San Felipe, the nucleus of the Spanish establishment of Santa Elena on Parris Island in South Carolina. See Chester B. DePratter, Stanley South, and James Legg, “The Discovery of Charlesfort (1562-1563),” *Transactions of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina* 101, 1996: 39-48.

¹³ William C. Sturtevant, “The Ethnological Evaluation of the le Moyne-de Bry Illustrations,” in Paul Hulton, ed., *The Work of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues*, 69-74.

¹⁴ This complexity has been well-examined by Kirsten Mahlke in *Offenbarung im Westen. Frühe Berichte aus der Neuen Welt* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005), 100-103.

¹⁵ Claude Gandelman, *Le regard dans le texte: Image et écriture du Quattrocento au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986), ch. 2: “Le geste du montreur,” 27-49.

¹⁶ *Coppie d’une Lettre*, f. A iii v°.

¹⁷ René de Laudonnière, *Histoire notable de la Floride* (1586), in *Les Français en Floride*, ed. Suzanne Lussagnet (Paris: PUF, 1958), 88.

¹⁸ Frank Lestringant, *Le Huguenot et le sauvage: L'Amérique et la controverse coloniale, en France, au temps des guerres de Religion*, Third Edition (Geneva: Droz, 2004), 252-253n72-73.

¹⁹ For more on this usage of the concept of mimicry (or mimikry), see note 2 above.

²⁰ One might here speak of cultural transfer, in Laurier Turgeon's sense of the term. See *Patrimoines métissés: Contextes coloniaux et postcoloniaux* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, and Sillery, QC: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2003).

²¹ Paul Hulton, ed., *The Work of Jacques Le Moyne*, 163: "The baskets here seem European and not Indian in both construction techniques and shape. The pack baskets are especially clearly a European type."

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