

Finding Caleb: Review of Historical Novel *Caleb's Crossing*

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Abstract *Caleb's Crossing* by Geraldine Brooks is a sophisticated example of recent historical fiction that mines the archives of colonial America. Brooks persuasively imagines the experiences of women and Native people, figures who are rarely represented in our special collections and history books.

Keywords Wampanoags; Puritans; archives; historical fiction

If, as I do, you run with the early American studies crowd, you probably know all about *Caleb's Crossing*, the most recent novel by novelist Geraldine Brooks. It seems we are in a (new) golden age of historical fiction rooted in colonial American archives. Scholars of early America have been having regular discussions of the widespread, serious, historical fiction interest in the American colonies and the new republic, a phenomenon that reoccurs periodically and is itself subject to speculation about what such an interest can mean in American culture.

It is, perhaps, too early to make grand meta-claims about what the latest turn to this brand of historical fiction might mean, but I can commend to you the books I've been reading recently: *The Widow's War* by Sally Gunning, *The Heretic's Daughter* by Kathleen Kent, *Island Under the Sea* by Isabel Allende.¹ Young Adult books have long taken an interest in "time travel"—usually for thinly-veiled didactic purposes, but recent books, such as *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation* by M.T. Anderson, the first volume of which won the National Book Award for Young Adult literature in 2006, exemplifies the genre at its best. All of these novels take up issues of power and gender or race in 17th- and 18th-century America in challenging ways, a trend that is perhaps most notable in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, an acclaimed work that imagines slavery in colonial New York.² Early American studies listservs and blogs suggest that almost every scholar of early American literature has taught the book.

Despite this recent flowering of well-researched, inventive and ambitious

fiction, the flipside of historical fiction is always with us—the escapist romances set in crumbling castles, the time-travelling romps, countless “you are there” children’s books. Some of this fiction is worth the reading—for pleasure, for plotting, as a spur to learn more about a past time and place. But at best, most such books are a guilty pleasure and, quite often, not worth even that.

On the spectrum of historical fiction writers, of course, Brooks is on the serious end. Her 2006 novel *March* won the Pulitzer Prize in literature. Her other novels engage history and fiction in important ways. At its best, this book also achieves something important—more on that note below. But I’d like to clear the ground for my discussion of what goes so well in this novel by talking about the elements I like the least. In short, the first half of the book flirts—seriously flirts—with the baser instincts of the historical romances.

Don’t get me wrong, I value escapist fiction (“comfort-food” reading, I call it; the macaroni-and-cheese of the world of literature). I have spent my fair share of time reading on the beach, and no (*contra* my survey students’ expectations perhaps), you won’t find copies of Puritan election-day sermons next to the sunscreen in my beach bag. But I think we’re on dangerous ground, fictionally speaking, when—as the opening chapters of *Caleb's Crossing* seem to do—we posit unrequited love, or even requited heavy breathing between imagined historical actors whose representation has for centuries tended toward the stereotypical and whose actual relationships have been pegged as misguided at best, miscegenation (and illegal to boot) at worst.

Consider this passage from early on in *Caleb's Crossing*: our narrator, Bethia Mayfield, a young Puritan growing up on present-day Martha’s Vineyard, describes a group of Wampanoag teens—a group that includes the eponymous Caleb Cheeshahteumauk—playing a ball game:

I had to look away then, for they were clad in Adam’s livery, save that their fig leaf was scrap of hide slung from a tie at their waists. . . . These youths were all of them very tall, lean in muscle, taut at the waist and broad in the chest, their long black hair flying and whipping about their shoulders. . . . you could see the long sinews of their thighs working as they ran.(21)

A voyeuristic description of luscious, exotic, at least to to Bethia, and nearly naked male bodies. It’s no wonder one review of the book described the narrative tone as “breathless”(Kirkus Reviews). If this book were being targeted to a young adult audience—and really, in many ways it could have been, as it tells the story of the youth and education of its main characters—I might be more forgiving on this point: after all, Brooks is telling the tale of 17th-century teenagers. From that point of view,

it should come as no surprise that the fifteen-year-old girl protagonist is taken by the good looking boy next door.

But there are easier ways to tell such a tale than mining 17th-century colonial history. Happily, Brooks retreats from the brink. It's clear that as much as Bethia admires Caleb, in the end she finds in him a brother rather than a lover—a replacement for her beloved twin Zuriel, killed as a child in a farming accident. More kin to her than Makepeace, her older, at-times abusive brother, whom she describes in contrast to the lean and sinewy youths playing ball on the beach as a young man who “cannot forebear from shearing sugarloaf anytime he feels himself unobserved, is of milky complexion, slight at the shoulders, soft at the middle and pitifully tooth shaken” (21). I found the siblings' relationship interesting, and I wonder what this book might have been like if Brooks had made Makepeace the narrator—Makepeace, who sees Caleb as an inferior but also a potent rival, who occupies the place of villain through much of the book, but who is revealed in the end to be a human being capable of making kind as well as selfish gestures.

But I digress. Back to the book we have. That last passage, the “soft at the middle and pitifully tooth shaken” illustrates one of the best qualities of the novel: its judicious use of jarring diction and syntax—at time historically accurate, at times not. Compare this moment to that in a real 17th-century text, John Josselyn's *Two Voyages to New England*, which he published in 1674. Josselyn was an Englishman who provides a minutely detailed account of the colonies through which he travelled: “Men and women keep their complexions, but lose their Teeth: The Women are pittifully Tooth-shaken; whether through the coldness of the climate, or by sweetmeats of which they have store, I am not able to affirm”(Josselyn). In historical fiction, this element of language often goes awry. Short of all-out, invented dialect (Toni Morrison's approach for the character Florens in *A Mercy*, for instance), how does a writer create an effect of the real, a sense that we are immersed in another time, without distracting us with too many “thees” and “thous”?³

Brooks does it through a mix of archaic syntax, selective (even creative) use of historic terms, and by adapting period genres to her own telling. Brooks's cadences ring true, from the opening, cryptic lines, “He is coming on the Lord's Day. Though my father has not seen fit to give me the news, I have the whole of it.” “He” is Caleb Cheeshahteumauk, son of a Sachem—a political leader—on the island known today as Martha's vineyard, nephew of a powerful Powwow—a religious leader—among the Wampanoag people of the island. “He” is also called by Bethia and her Puritan cohort “pagan,” “brutish” and “salvage” (even “wanton young salvage”), all words in common use in the 17th century.

Despite their reputation for (and pride in) unadorned plain style, Puritan

preachers and writers could turn a good metaphor, and Brooks makes good use of such phrasing. Bethia describes Caleb's thirst for knowledge: "he brims like a stream in spate, gathering all the knowledge that floods in upon him" (109). Master Corlett, tutor to Caleb and the holder of Bethia's indenture, warns her from a similar thirst, telling her that she risks poisoning her mind reading of the exploits of the notorious "heretic" Anne Hutchinson: "you would not, I hope, drink from a spring that was befouled by a rotting corpse. Why then foul your mind with the rantings of a heretic?" (235). Such language bespeaks Brooks's immersion in period sources: neither metaphor is lifted directly from any 17th-century text as far as I know, but they easily *might* have been.

As befits a novel narrated by a colonial woman, much of the flavor of the language comes through the vocabulary of household chores and of childbirth. Cows are "beeves", sheep are "tegs". Bethia ascribes the dingy state of the young scholars' linens in the house in which she is put to work to the previous housekeeper's neglect of "blue starch and boiling kettle" (105). Women in labor are given "groaning beer" and they all sleep on straw-stuffed "shakedownns". What makes this work, I think, is that Brooks chooses words that are legible to us as twenty-first century readers even if we haven't seen them: we don't need to know what blue starch is to get the gist of her criticism.⁴ And at times, Brooks even seems to choose words that are more authentic-sounding than authentic—and that's not a criticism on my part, but recognition of good craft. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary traces "shakedown" only to the 18th century, and "groaning beer" was a strong drink brewed, not to lessen the pains of the woman about to give birth (although it may have been so used!), but to reward the labor of the midwives, ease the wait of anxious male family members, and entertain well-wishers who descended on the house to congratulate the family.⁵

There are many such examples, but I'll just suggest, quickly, one more interesting adaptation of historical sources. Aside from the flavor of word choice or a good turn of phrase, the form of the whole book—a three-part personal journal written on carefully husbanded scraps of paper—merges the authentic with the anachronistic in productive ways. There is no way that a young woman of Bethia's upbringing in the seventeenth century could have (or would have, or should have) written the kind of first-person journal that we want to read. Journals and other personal accounts were meant to record evidence of God's providence or serve as business ledgers. It would have been considered the height of self-indulgent arrogance to make a detailed record of one's emotions and feelings. First-person works from the seventeenth-century contain elaborate explanations and apologies for publication. And so, although this novel gives us the access to Bethia's interior that we demand as contemporary readers, it is presented to us as Bethia's spiritual diary, a genre that is grounded in historical

precedent. Colonists did compose accounts of God's doings with them, published as examples or warnings to others or—more commonly—delivered in church before the community in order to demonstrate readiness for church membership. Bethia's journal partakes of the conventions of such conversion narratives. She writes early on, "Break God's laws and suffer ye his wrath. Well, and so I do. The Lord lays his hand sore upon me, as I bend under the toil I know have—mother's and mine, both[...]. At fifteen, I have taken up the burdens of a woman, and have come to feel I am one. Furthermore, I am glad of it" (6). All this is perfectly in keeping with the expressed sentiments of Puritan women's writings that have come down to us from the 17th century.⁶ If in later pages the fiction of the spiritual journal wears thin and we clearly understand Bethia to be railing against her lot and expressing sentiments more in tune with our own than with any early modern Englishwoman, well, that's what historical fiction is for, after all—to be a window on both the past and reflection of the present.

Such measures of Brooks's technique are impressive, and so too is her use of the historical record both as inspiration for the character of Caleb and for the setting in which she places him. In her Author's Note, Brooks warns that "the character of Caleb as portrayed in this novel is, in every way, a work of fiction" (ix). A necessary caveat, both because the archival traces of Caleb Cheeshahteumauk are few and piecemeal and also because of the dangers inherent in making those traces speak with authority or authenticity for individuals and peoples historically marginalized or silenced. In his meditation on the origin and makeup of the archive, Jacques Derrida notes the coercive nature of historical research—archives are forced to acquiesce to our questions, to our probing, a form of (what he calls) "archival violence" made all the more distressing by the fact that the man we know as Caleb Cheeshahteumauk survives in the archive primarily through the production of a printed text within a colonial system that stripped his kith and kin of traditional lands and customs.⁷ In short, however rich the oral tradition or other sources of information about him, in the print archives of colonial America we have only a brief essay, written by Caleb to prove his worth as a student, preserved because it was sent to financial backers in England as a kind of dividend on their charitable investments. What, if anything, can it really tell us about Caleb?

We can glean something of his experiences with careful attention to the print record. At a minimum, it tells us that at the time of its composition he had some classical education, as he compares the relationship of English supporters with Native converts and students to that of Orpheus and "the forests and the rocks [that] were moved by his song."⁸ He was well schooled in the conventions of correspondence, addressing the letter to his "Most honored benefactors" and signing it "Most devoted to your dignity: Caleb Cheeshateaumauk".

At first glance, these elements of his essay—and indeed the whole discussion within it, seems hopelessly coopted by the colonial mindset. In the book even Bethia shares our contemporary sense of disappointment with the rote/conventional nature of Caleb's scholarship. During the commencement ceremonies, she escapes the press and heat of the University hall and misses his presentation: "Although I was keen to hear Caleb, I knew he would do admirably with the hoary old topics of theses *philosophicae* and *philologicae*. Indeed, nothing was said that afternoon that had not already been said a dozen times previous in the same place" (287). But against our disappointment that his surviving writing doesn't give us more of his lived experiences (and as a consequence that his story needs must be filled in with our imaginations today), I note that few students in any time submit aggressively iconoclastic essays for credit. And few teachers would favorably grade an essay that ignored the assignment and went off the rails to attack, say, the foundations of the university system.

I won't try to launch into a full reading of the essay here—a reading that I think must go both with and against the grain to gain some real purchase on the work, but I will suggest the directions I might take in a couple of broad strokes: first, surely it's meaningful that Caleb chooses the example of Odysseus to examine here. In this test of Caleb's writing and compositional skills, he chooses to laud a singer, a poet of the oral tradition. Thus a fuller reading of his essay would need to consider the animation of trees and rocks that were "moved by his song"—a reflection, perhaps, of the concept of *Manitou*, in which the Western binary of human/nonhuman does not suffice to describe agency in a world in which everything partakes of the spiritual to some degree.⁹ I'm interested as well in the way that Caleb wraps up the letter. Though he signs it dutifully enough, in the last sentence of the body of the letter, he reduces the honored benefactors to instruments with less animation than the rocks and trees of Odysseus's tale, calling the Englishmen who paid for his education "instruments like aqueducts in bestowing all these benefits on us." While there's nothing in such an image that is challenging—strictly speaking—to the world order of those benefactors, it does hint at a reordering of importance: the English benefactors are purely instrumental, and men like Caleb rather than his financial underwriters are the fully human recipients of their generosity.

Beyond this scrap of Caleb's own writing we glimpse him a very few times in written sources—just a mention of a name here and there, in contexts that suggest that although Brooks restricted the circle of Native friends in Cambridge to three people, there was a small but vibrant community of young men—and at least one woman—from the Nipmuc, Wampanoag, and other peoples living and working together in the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁰ But that's about it; so much for the print archive.

There's a second approach that has been gaining currency among scholars:

searching beyond the print archive, to oral histories, material culture, non-alphabetic signification systems to glimpse more of the lived experience of historical figures, especially those who did not leave behind letters, diaries, poems, or sermons (or whose letters, diaries, poems and sermons weren't valued enough to keep). Take, for instance a textile bag held in the collections of the Peabody museum at Harvard. Although there is nothing intrinsic to the artifact identifying it as Caleb's—its collection title is "small bag"—when the bag was acquired by the museum, it came with a handwritten label identifying it as Caleb, and museum publications explicitly call it "Caleb's bag."¹¹ Whether or not he ever carried this particular bag, its provenance as an object from the right time and place suggests another approach to understanding his life. We can research the plant fibers and dye that make up this 8 by 5 inch bag, and other material objects from the region and time. We can compare it to Algonquian textiles and to English textiles from the same period and note the similarities and differences in its decoration. We can turn to Native Studies scholars who consider what meaning traditional and new patterns carry during the colonial period. We know from such scholars that Algonquian textile patterns encode the spiritual and cultural alongside the practical, and our picture of what life was like for him in 1660s Cambridge might then include the fact that he was not completely cut off from all memories of his childhood and family.¹² We might remember that alphabetic literacy does not erase other forms of cultural literacies, even if some of us are literate in only one language, only one form.

There's a third approach to Caleb, an approach that Brooks shares with historians, though we don't always recognize that historians share many of the narrative techniques of fiction writers. Carolyn Steedman, in her meditation on archival theory argues that partial historical records are not dead ends to understanding. In her words, "an absence is not *nothing*, but is rather the space left by what has gone: how the emptiness indicates how once it was filled and animated"(Steedman 11). Scholars devote their intellectual lives to speculation about what once inhabited such spaces. Likewise, *Caleb's Crossing* re-fills and re-animates the emptiness of the historical record. I'll conclude with a brief sketch of two examples from the book, both of which could be fictional missteps, but which in Brooks's treatment transcend mere sentiment in the way that they work together. In the first, we learn that when Solace, Bethia's beloved younger sister is buried, Caleb, by then a member of her household, slips something into her hand before she is buried. Bethia seeks him out the next day "fearing that whatever he had put into her hand might be an unchristian thing. He told me that it was a scrap of parchment on which he had made a fair copy of the scripture of our Lord, *Suffer the little children* . . . he had tied it up with his own wampum-beaded thong of deer hide, around the peg doll that Makepeace had fashioned for her and that

had been her chief plaything.” Bethia questions him: “A medicine bundle, such as the pawaaws use?” (115) Such a bundle would have been anathema to a good Puritan, as it should have been to Caleb by this time in his Christian education. But he finds a way through the spiritual impasse, arguing that this object is “not quite” a medicine bundle, but an acceptable amalgamation of his traditional and new belief systems. We have no way of knowing, of course, whether Caleb’s belief and practices were this syncretic (consider the orthodox sentiments of his essay), but it seems worth imagining that he was, given his background, given that we know of real funeral objects, such as the one Brooks imagines, that combine traditional Native and Christian elements. In a collection of New England Native primary texts that I have edited, for example, Kevin McBride analyzes an object, excavated from a Pequot burial ground at the behest of the Pequot nation and subsequently reburied. Interred with a 12-year-old Pequot girl, the object was a cloth bag that included the left paw of a bear and a page from a King James Bible referencing the right hand of God.¹³ It seems plausible Caleb would have been attracted to this kind of mixed media, that Solace’s fictional bundle fills the space in the archive that once was filled and animated by Caleb’s consideration of the beliefs to which he was born.

The second example is that of Caleb’s deathbed, in which scene Brooks again brings in material culture. The flyleaf of the hardcover book has an image of Caleb’s Latin essay. But the title page is illustrated with a black-and-white drawing of a wampum belt, that is, a belt of beads made from shell. Although “wampum” has been misunderstood as “Indian money” because English colonists adapted it as a medium of exchange, wampum also had a spiritual meaning, and it functioned as a mnemonic or symbolic technology for commemorating agreements and treaties.¹⁴

As Caleb lies dying from consumption, Bethia seeks out his powwow uncle, receives instruction from him about how to ease him into the next life and is given a wampum belt to bring to him. Much like the stifled romance between Caleb and Bethia at the beginning of the book, Caleb’s deathbed scene risks cliché, but I think it is both powerful and effective because it is hard won—we’ve followed Caleb and Bethia through the halls of the prep school and the Indian college, for me the most effective scenes, possibly because Bethia no less than Caleb was on alien territory. We’ve witnessed miscarriages, suffering, death. In this scene as in her book as a whole, Brooks brings together the archival traces of Caleb’s life, which is the evidence that in the academy we are trained to privilege, with the evidence of his life that is implicit in the material culture of 17th-century Native peoples and the oral histories of their descendents. The afterword makes clear that Brooks has sought out the stories of the Wampanaog community as well as scouring colonial print and archival materials. And so Bethia, who has been our narrator and guide into this time and place, acts

as another sort of go-between for Caleb, who lies dying in an English town, and his powwow uncle, who lives apart from the English on his natal island. Bethia receives ritual acts and words from the uncle, which she brings to Caleb, and she brings him the wampum belt, with “the whole history of the Nobnocket band . . . encoded in its pattern, for any wise enough to read it” (297).

This description of the wampum belt and its significance exemplifies what I like best about the book. Brooks has managed, by carefully searching out, husbanding, and then distilling her historical and personal sources, to give us a tragedy that doesn’t feel like “the end”. The last line of the narrative proper calls the story a “dissonant and tragical lament” (300). But if we have a lament, we must have a lamenter, a fact that at least carries with it the idea of a future beyond immediate grief. The afterward suggests one thread of the future initiated by Caleb Cheeshteumauk, and it’s a future carried forward not by well-meaning and sentimental white friends, but by contemporary Wampanoag people: “Tiffany Smalley, the first Martha’s Vineyard Wopannak since Caleb Cheeshahteumauk to complete an undergraduate degree at Harvard College” received her diploma last spring(Rohr) .

Notes

1. For a book-length treatment of an earlier moment of fictional interest in the English colonies in America, see Philip Gould, *Covenant and Republic: Historical Romance and the Politics of Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For examples of and short discussions of poetry inspired by early American archives, see the ongoing feature, “Poetic Research” in *Common-Place* <www.common-place.org>.
2. See the forthcoming roundtable on teaching *A Mercy*, which will appear in the journal *Early American Literature* with an introduction by Lisa Logan.
3. In her review of the book, Jane Smiley also praises Brooks’ imagined 17th-century language, making the point that such linguistic representation serves not only to immerse us in another, distant time but also to remind us how much our identities depend on the words and phrases we use: “A serious historical novel like *Caleb’s Crossing* always proposes that consciousness is at least in part a function of language, and that as language changes, so does thought, understanding, identity.” See “Geraldine Brooks’ Pilgrims and Indians” *New York Times, Sunday Book Review*. 13 May, 2011. Nytimes, 12 July, 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/books/review/book-review-calebs-crossing-by-geraldine-brooks.html?pagewanted=all>>.
4. For the record, blue starch was made by combining cobalt or indigo with starch and that after linens had been washed, they were boiled an additional period with the mixture in order to whiten and stiffen them. And you had to stir the pot the whole time to avoid scorching the clothes.
5. The expectant mother prepared the beer (and groaning cakes, groaning pies, etc.) for the midwives

and others who would come to help her, though Judge Samuel Sewall, notes in his diary that he brewed his wife's groaning beer some two months before she delivered. See M. Halsey Thomas, ed, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall 1674-1729*, Vol. I (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973) 36.

6. The textual antecedent most early Americanists know is Mary Rowlandson's 1682 published account of her captivity and ransom during King Philip's War, and Brooks writes that she relied on Rowlandson's account to help her construct Bethia's voice (305). Rowlandson concludes her account of loss, suffering and redemption with this reflection: "I hope I can say in some measure, As *David* did, it is good for me that I have been afflicted." See Neal Salisbury, ed, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996) 112.

7. See Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 7.

8. For a translation and transcription of this essay as well as a consideration of its context and meaning, see Wolfgang Hochbruck and Beatrix Dudensing-Reichel, "Honoratissimi Benefactores: Native American Students and Two Seventeenth-Century Texts in the University Tradition." *Early Native American Writings: New Critical Essays*, ed. Helen Jaskoski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 5.

9. See Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans and the Making of New England, 1500-1643* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

10. For a fuller analysis of Caleb's essay and a discussion of his New England surroundings, see Chapter 2, "Praing Indians, Printing Devils" in Drew Lopenzina, *Red Ink: Native Americans Picking Up the Pen in Colonial America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

11. Christina J. Hodge, Senior Curatorial Assistant, Peabody Museum, Personal communication. February 14, 2012. See "Native Student Biographies" 10 July, 2012. <<http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/495>>.

12. On the analysis of colonial Native textiles, see Stephanie Fitzgerald, "The Cultural Work of a Mohegan Painted Basket." *Early Native Literacies in New England*, eds. Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008): 52-56; and Ann McMullen, ed. *A Key Into the Language of Woodsplint Baskets* (Institute for American Indian Studies, 1987).

13. See Kevin McBride, "Bundles, Bears, and Bibles: Interpreting Seventeenth-Century Native 'Texts' ." *Early Native Literacies in New England*, eds. Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008): 132-141.

14. For discussions of the significance of wampum among Algonquians and in New England more generally, see Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Matt Cohen, *The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Germaine Warkentin, "In Search of 'The Word of the Other': Aboriginal Sign Systems and the History of the Book in Canada." *Book History*, Vol. 2 (1999): 1-27.

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