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through the American Renaissance**

Reiner Smolinski
General Editor

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Early America Re-Explored

New Readings in Colonial,
Early National,
and Antebellum Culture

Edited by
Klaus H. Schmidt and
Fritz Fleischmann



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For
Nikolaus Fleischmann (1915–1997)
Hans P. Schmidt (1939–2000)
&
Anthony Köstler (1999–)

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**Puritan Missionaries
and the Colonization of the New World:
A Reading of John Eliot's *Indian Dialogues* (1671)**

Frank Kelleter

I

History is what remains. One would expect the past, much like a foreign country, to assemble a confined, if elusive, storage of “usable” meaning, but contemporary historiographical debates seem to tell a different story.¹ If history really teaches a “lesson,” it is mainly one of clamorous rhetoric and perpetual contention, with the records of past achievements and past crimes irresistibly insinuating themselves into our struggles for proprietorship of the present. Frequently, these struggles aim for a more than merely interpretive hegemony, and many a war, cultural and otherwise, is fought over the question of who is authorized to inhabit and reorganize that foreign but rarely far-off country of the past. Paradoxical as it may seem, such challenges to the normative power and immutability of tradition tend to create an intellectual climate favorable to the establishment of foundation myths—because in the still ongoing history of history, no exorcism of mythical thinking has ever been so complete as to prevent its own mythification.

Myths tend to spawn counter-myths: It did not take long until the eighteenth-century representation of the Puritan “pilgrim fathers” as proto-American and heroically democratic cultivators of a “New World” was replaced by a no less heroic, no less mythical counter-image of Indian culture as the young nation’s forgotten and repressed past.² This topos of lost authenticity—the establishment of a designedly non-white, non-Western, but nonetheless indigenously “American” martyrology—first gained currency in the three tumultuous decades following the American Revolution until, in the first half of the nineteenth century, cultural elegies about a “vanishing race” finally managed to create a whole genre of their own.³ Strikingly, the same cultural topos can still be found today in numerous academic studies on early American culture which have helped to popularize the image of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indians as a doomed people roaming the woods of New England in the shape of pantheistic sages or ecological warriors

avant la lettre—victimized by the economic aspirations and technological hybris of white European colonizers.

But is this story so wrong? The mere status of victim may not qualify a cultural group for truth-giving martyrdom, but is not there something to be said for our almost univocal sympathy for those who proved to be the losers in a historical process that cannot be termed other than exploitative? Is the high esteem in which Indian cultures are held in contemporary criticism merely an indication of the unavowed attraction of postmodernism to romantic patterns of thought? One may wonder about the psychological benefits offered by Francis Jennings's statement that "it seems desirable to make a special effort to see things as Indians might," but his revision of early settlement history as an "invasion" seems to be sustained by the ideological self-presentation of seventeenth-century colonial discourse itself (*Invasion* 14).

Indeed, there may be good reasons for viewing the Puritan settlers as imperialist conquerors. Take, for example, John Cotton's famous sermon *God's Promise to His Plantations*—preached in 1630 to a group of enterprising Puritans just about to embark on their voyage to Massachusetts Bay. Before they even have set foot on their New World, the pious colonists already seem to know for certain what they will find there. As Cotton tells them: "[T]hey shall have peacable and quiet resting there, The sonnes of wickedness shall afflict them no more," because "[t]he placing of a people in this or that Countrey is from the appointment of the Lord" (65). To a modern reader, the complete lack of adventurous inquisitiveness that speaks out of these sentences is striking. Instead of "the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, the local excitement of discontinuous wonders" (Greenblatt 3), we find an ideological self-conviction that seems appropriate more for unflinching crusaders than for humble pilgrims. The Indians figure, if at all, as "enemies" whose land has to be appropriated—either by "lawfull warre" or "by way of purchase" (Cotton 66).

In the same year as John Cotton, but an ocean away, William Bradford looks back on a decade of Puritan settlement at Plymouth and, though he should know better, speaks of the "vast and unpeopled countries of America" that awaited his small group of separatists ten years ago (25). Where are the Indians? It would be mistaken to say that Brad-

ford simply ignores—or denies—their existence. Nor does Cotton mean to falsify geo-historical facts when he speaks of America as "a vacant place" (66). Rather, the presence of a native population in New England is in both cases interpreted along typological lines as a divinely appointed ordeal: the presence of Indians no less than the presence of a natural "wilderness" calls on the Christian settlers to overcome and master these trials and thus truly prove themselves to be God's chosen people. From the beginning, then, the Indians are perceived as *spiritual antagonists* rather than material competitors; they do not inhabit, they *are* the "wilderness." So if Bradford and Cotton speak of an "unpeopled" or "waste" country, what they are referring to is not a landscape devoid of population but a population that cannot be told apart from its still uncultivated surroundings. The land is "waste" because it is wasted in the hands of those who live on it without agriculturally "improving" it—without, that is, putting the land to its divinely appointed use.⁴ Thus, Native Americans are effectively perceived as part of a prehistorical, if not prehuman, landscape that dictates its own transformation into a well-ordered and flourishing garden. Describing the effects of an epidemic disease that befell the New England Indians shortly before their first contact with the English, Edward Johnson writes in *Wonder-Working Providence* (1654):

[B]y this meanes *Christ* (whose great and glorious workes the Earth throughout are altogether for the benefit of his Churches and chosen) not onely made room for his people to plant; but also tamed the hard and cruell hearts of these barbarous Indians, insomuch that halfe a handfull of his people landing not long after in *Plimoth-Plantation*, found little resistance. (17)

There is, it seems, a fatal straightforwardness in Puritan typology: the subordination of any kind of (albeit ethnocentric) intercultural curiosity to a rigid scheme of theological prescriptions leaves the Protestant settlers no choice but to approach the Indians with the attitude of imperial conquerors.

This, at least, seems to be the accepted reading of the role played by Puritan religion in the process of colonization (see Simmons, "Cultural Bias" 56–72). If exceptions are granted—and scholars are increasingly unwilling to do so—they concern the actions of the Puritan missionaries who, almost in contradiction to the typological dictates summarized

above, insist on viewing the Indians not as devils incarnate but as benighted children in need of Christian instruction.⁵ This attitude may not seem to differ markedly from Bradford's description of Native Americans as "savage and brutish men . . . little otherwise than the wild beasts" (25), but it can at least boast altruistic motives on the part of its proponents. My contention is that neither the interpretive reduction of Puritan typology to an instrument of economic exploitation nor the traditional image of the Puritan mission as a benevolent, even if not beneficent, enterprise is helpful in trying to understand the complexities of English-Indian relations in early America. This paper, therefore, wants to reconsider the role played by religious motivation in the colonization of the New World. While it would be absurd to deny the xenophobic consequences of typological preconceptions, it seems equally mistaken to neglect the challenges that were put to official theological discourse by the material realities of intercultural encounter in the years 1620–1675 (i.e. from the landing of the *Mayflower* to King Philip's War). William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* can be taken as a case in point: throughout Bradford's narrative, typological interpretation clashes with secular concerns that resist religious functionalization. A major rhetorical dilemma of the text thus consists in the attempt to negotiate between theological prescriptions and the pragmatics of the situation—more frequently than not in favor of *Realpolitik* rather than ideology.⁶ A similar influence of obstinate cultural realities on religious convictions has to be claimed for the work of the Puritan missionaries. At the same time, no study of early American culture can afford to disregard the evidence collected by Francis Jennings, Neal Salisbury and others, showing how a supposedly disinterested missionary discourse remained intimately linked to economic and military interests (see "Goals and Functions" and "Red Puritans"). The first part of the following paper will therefore briefly delineate the political framework within which the missionary movement had to operate. After that, I will reverse the perspective and, using John Eliot's *Indian Dialogues* (1671) as my main point of reference, analyze the peculiar and often surprisingly contingent ruptures that occurred between the Puritans' colonial striving for socio-economic dominance on the one hand and their more than simply

instrumental employment of a Christian discourse of conversion on the other.

II

From the beginning, the Puritan settlement effort drew its theological legitimacy at least partly from the moral obligation to "propagat[e] and advanc[e] the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world" (Bradford 25). The seal of the Massachusetts Bay Company famously portrayed a naked Indian, bow and arrow pointed to the ground, asking the English Protestants to "Come over and help us." Given the centrality of the theme of Indian conversion in official Puritan discourse, one cannot help being struck by the blatant unwillingness of the colonial ministry to live up to the demands of their professed duty. It was not until 1646—i.e. sixteen years after the landing of the *Arbella*—that a campaign came under way to proselytize the Indians of Massachusetts Bay, and historians are still arguing about the success of this late attempt at evangelical activity. While most contemporary studies subscribe to Jennings's view that "[r]hetoric considerably outran performance" ("Goals and Functions" 198), some scholars challenge this assessment and detect a "marked success" in the Puritans' attempt to convert Indians to Christianity (Naeher 346).⁷ In a somewhat less partisan analysis of colonial Indian-English relations, Alden T. Vaughan and Daniel K. Richter suggest that the New England colonists indeed were more successful in attracting religious converts than is usually thought, but that this numerical success was substantially marred by the *quality* of Indian transculturation. Which is to say that John Eliot, Daniel Gookin and the Mayhews did actually manage to draw many Native Americans to the Christian faith, but that, at the same time, the internal demands of Puritan dogma more frequently than not prevented the possibility of a complete or meaningful conversion.

Judged by the demanding standards of Puritan evangelical ideology, the mission thus must be regarded as a failure. There are various reasons for this, with the most obvious one to be found in the instrumental character of missionary rhetoric. There can be no doubt that the constant reference to evangelical responsibilities in the literature of exploration and

colonization was meant to supply an Anglo-European audience with altruistic motives for their (preferably financial) support of the settlement enterprise. Once that support was procured, other concerns overshadowed the missionary task. As late as 1671, John Eliot complained in the preface to his *Indian Dialogues* (a work which has to be seen, among other things, as a petition for funding, addressed to “the Commissioners of the United Colonies in New England”) that “I find few English students willing to engage into so dim a work as this” (i.e. “to take care of the Indians” by “communicating the good knowledge of God”).⁸

A second reason for the Puritans’ inattention towards their missionary duty can be located in a widespread *ethnic disdain of Indian cultures* among European settlers—an ethnic disdain that may have been strengthened by the Puritans’ typologically established understanding of themselves as divine instruments in an eschatological warfare between Good and Evil, Christ and Satan (with the Indians, of course, typed in the role of the premillennial antagonist). Thus finding themselves prime actors in a biblical landscape, the colonists had good reason to have second thoughts about their professed task of “helping” the heathens. Besides, *if* the Indians really were heathens, then their mass conversion could not be brought about anyway, because according to an apocalyptic reading of history (i.e. according to the prescriptions of the Book of Revelation), the conversion of Gentile unbelievers had to be preceded by the conversion of the Jews. Under the pressure of this hermeneutical given, Puritan missionary discourse quickly mutated into a debate over, not the necessity, but the *possibility* of attracting Indian converts—with the result that many colonists took the sequence prescribed in Revelation (first Jews, then Gentiles) as “a convenient excuse to keep on delaying evangelical activities” (see Cogley 212).⁹

Thirdly and probably most importantly, the work of conversion failed to yield the desired results even where it was earnestly undertaken. The reason for this, as Vaughan and Richter point out, has to be sought in the peremptory character of Puritan orthodox faith. While other Christian settlers in the New World—most notably the Jesuits in Nouvelle France—were willing to accept partial acculturation and religious syncretism as a transitory state on the way to eventual conversion, the Puritan missionaries typically demanded from their Indian

proselytes a complete adoption of Calvinist dogma in creed and conduct.¹⁰ This, of course, is hardly surprising if one keeps in mind that the *purification* of faith and ritual lies at the very heart of Protestant self-understanding. The Puritans had left the Old World precisely because of their uncompromising stand on the question of proper piety, so that now “they were not about to look favorably on deviant customs in a setting under their control” (Bowden and Ronda 23). But as far as their attempt to turn Native Americans into Christians was concerned, this exclusivist attitude proved fatal. While numerous Indians were attracted to the authority of white religion (mostly admiring the power of the white deity as it seemed to manifest itself in the technological superiority of the European colonists and their terrifying victory in the Pequot War), white ministers invariably rebuffed their Indian neophytes by telling them that “conversion” involved more than merely a switch to different religious rituals. The Puritans were simply not willing to let the Indians “add” the Christian trinity to their own pantheon of gods in the same way the Natives had incorporated kettles, axes, and fishhooks into their traditional lifestyle (see Bowden and Ronda 33). Above all, the Puritan insistence on exclusive adherence to one unchanging system of religious belief was in itself rather alien to Native religious sensibilities. The little we know about precontact religion in North America seems to suggest that most tribes practiced a highly flexible and inclusivist form of worship—“a kind of pragmatic cultural relativism,” as James Ronda calls it. To a religious culture that “did not contain any missionary impulse” itself, the evangelizing emphasis on God’s jealousy—“Thou shalt have no other gods before me!”—must have appeared unaccountably strange.¹¹

It is this absolutism, however, that imparted a socio-economic quality to the Puritan mission. James Ronda’s remark that “[t]he Indian who embraced Christianity was compelled, in effect, to commit cultural suicide” (67) is by no means exaggerated here. In fact, the Puritan interdiction against selective borrowing in matters of religious belief amounted to the demand of a conversion that signally transcended the bounds of spiritual concerns. When Piumbukhou, Eliot’s fictional convert in the first *Indian Dialogue*, happens upon a Native religious festivity, the “great dancing, sacrifice, and play” which form part of his own cultural memory are all but meaningless to him: “[W]hat noise is this I

hear?" he asks a fellow Indian. Reprimanded by his kinsman that this "noise" expresses precisely "those delights and fashions that your countrymen use," the Christianized Native answers the implied offer to join his "friends and kindred" in their merriment like any good Puritan would: "I cannot serve two masters" (65). Another proselyte from Eliot's *Dialogues* describes his change in religious disposition with the suggestive sentence: "I am another man than I was" (160). These words must be taken literally, for in the Puritan understanding of successful conversion, nothing short of a *rebirth* would do—a spiritual transformation that involved a complete *cultural* reorientation as well.

This nexus between religious conversion and cultural self-exorcism seems to render dubious the traditional image of the Puritan missionaries as disinterested and altruistic "saviors of souls." It is true, John Eliot opens his *Indian Dialogues* with an invocation of the principle of salvational care—asserting the Christian duty to free the Indians

from the dark dungeon of their lost and ruined condition, into the light of Lord Jesus, whose glory . . . beginneth to be displayed among their dead countrymen, who begin to be clothed with sinews, flesh and skin upon their dried bones, by the power of the spirit of Jesus Christ, in the preaching of the gospel unto them (63)

—but only a few pages later he reveals that this "clothing" of "dead" Natives is meant not merely as a theo-thanatological metaphor but also describes the colonial civilizing process, which turns "naked" savages into "dressed" gentlemen: "The knowledge of the means of grace, the ordinances of God," Eliot's mouthpiece Piumbukhou pronounces, is intimately connected with European "ways of good government, and good order" (67). This, precisely, is Eliot's way of phrasing the widespread European belief that heathen savages first have to be "civilized"—or, to use Eliot's own terminology, "reduced to civility"—before they can be successfully saved from eternal damnation (see Hertrampf 49 and Salisbury, "Red Puritans" 28).

Eliot's rhetoric thus seems to suggest a rather unholy conflation of salvational concerns with imperialist interests. This "political" dimension of Puritan missionary tracts has recently been stressed by scholars such as Neal Salisbury, Francis Jennings, and J. William T. Youngs.¹² According to Salisbury, for instance, "Eliot and Gookin were . . . more

than religious instructors and supervisors. They were, in effect, social managers with an important role in English policy towards the Indians" ("Red Puritans" 42). In a way, this hardly comes as a surprise, because the missionaries could not have prevented their actions from taking on a political and economic dimension even if they had wanted to. Given their rejection of religious syncretism, their teachings inevitably wound up challenging the established power structure of Native American societies. If Eliot did not want to sabotage his own campaign by threatening social isolation for prospective converts (a frequently raised concern among Indians attracted to Christianity), he was faced with the alternative of either integrating individual neophytes into white congregations (which was not a viable option) or converting *whole communities* (an endeavor which would automatically dissolve Indian social hierarchy). The key to evangelical success was thus to be found in a conversion of Native American political leaders: if a sachem could be persuaded to adopt Christian religion, his people were likely to follow, because doing so would no longer hold the threat of social ostracism. The sachems, however, understanding the socio-economic consequences of such a move, were not easily persuaded. The culmination and decisive turning point of the conversion process, as blueprinted in the *Indian Dialogues*, therefore consisted in the missionary's confrontation with the established Native government. A good deal of evangelical energy was spent in trying to convince the sachems that their adoption of white theology would not diminish their political power nor result in a loss of personal authority.¹³

So if conversion to Christianity involved a conversion to European patterns of social and economic organization—if, in the words of Vancura, "[Eliot's] religious ideas went hand in hand with the concepts of regulated enterprise and a certain measure of private property" (88)—this seeming synchronicity of theological impulse and colonial interest has to be traced back to the specific characteristics of Puritan dogma itself and not to socio-economic motives that exist prior to, or independent of, religious belief. In that sense, it might be more useful to speak of the political *effects* of the Puritan mission rather than to regard missionary activities as a mere *instrument* of colonial exploitation. Nevertheless, it is vital to attend to the manner in which material cultural re-

alities are entangled with “otherworldly” concerns. The most visible evidence of the mission’s role in the socio-economic reorganization of Native American societies can be found, of course, in Eliot’s practice of bringing together converted Indians in closed social units called “praying towns.” These Christian Indian settlements were established for the explicit purpose of easing the propagation of the gospel to willing neophytes. But the praying towns had other functions as well. Elise Brenner writes:

A praying town was, in reality, a reservation: an attempt to isolate a group of Indians in an area with definable boundaries so as to be able to physically control them more easily. The need to contain Indian groups and prevent them from wandering indiscriminately is repeated in all missionary records. (139)

In other words, apart from serving as educational institutions, Puritan praying towns had the added benefit of facilitating white settlement and expansion by cleansing the land of Native inhabitants with an unchristian predilection for nomadic lifestyles. What is more, Eliot’s Indian “reservations” were intentionally designed for *military* purposes as well. Not only did the New England colonists cultivate their Indian converts as potential allies (the praying towns were armed in 1660), the very layout of these settlements was meant to provide a *cordon sanitaire* for white towns and villages against possible attacks from other Indian tribes, especially the Mohawks (see Brenner 145). Daniel Gookin, for instance, did not mince his words when he drew the attention of his sponsors, the London “Corporation for Promoting the Gospel among the Indians in America,” to the military contribution that praying Indians could (and did) offer in case of war:

The situation of those towns was such, that the Indians in them might have been improved as a wall of defence about the greatest part of the colony of Massachusetts; for the first named of those villages bordered upon the Merrimack river, and the rest in order about twelve or fourteen miles asunder, including most of the frontiers. (436; also qtd. in Brenner 145)

Given these words, written shortly after King Philip’s War, it seems hard to debate the fact that the work of conversion served as a means to more than merely religious ends.

And yet, if we choose to regard Puritan theological convictions as an ideological medium of imperial interests, the question arises why King

Philip’s War did put such an abrupt end to the missionary effort in New England—*despite* the fact that the war probably would have turned out differently if the white settlers had not been able to rely on the military help of their Christianized Indian neighbors. Why did Eliot and Gookin find themselves under so much pressure to justify their missionary work—and not only after 1675 but as soon as they started their evangelical campaign? And how should we judge their earnest, frequently courageous, support for the legal rights and the moral reputation of their converts? (Eliot, it should be remembered, almost fell victim to a lynch mob because of his advocacy of Indian Christianity.) Remarkably, Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues* contain numerous passages that combine their call for “civilizing” the Indians with an unequivocal demand that civilized men, let alone Christianized ones, be treated according to their newly gained status, regardless of their ethnicity. Eliot’s and Gookin’s struggle against xenophobic prejudice amongst the English settlers can hardly be reduced to a colonialist strategy for achieving socio-economic dominance. In fact, it may have been their religious faith that allowed the missionaries, ethnocentric as their attitude towards the Native Americans was, to regard Indian converts as *fellow believers*—and hence fellow human beings. Daniel Gookin’s *Historical Account of the Doings and Sufferings of the Christian Indians in New England* (1677) is a remarkable document in this respect, and not only because it extends the typological “martyrdom” and “necessary affliction” suffered by the New England colonists during King Philip’s War to Christian Indians as well.¹⁴ Gookin furthermore suggests that the true cause of white misgivings about the worth of missionary activity may actually be found in the white settlers’ desire to appropriate ever more Indian land—the very motive that recent scholars suspect behind Gookin’s concern for Indian salvation. Consider Gookin’s own words:

[T]he occult and main reason inducing some of them to desire to be rid of the neighbourhood of those Indians, was in respect of a fair tract of land, belonging to them (near Marlborough) not only by natural right but by a grant from the General Court in the Massachusetts Colony; and this is more latent now than heretofore, for some of the people of those parts have very lately, in the spring 1677, not only taken away the fencing stuff from about the Indians’ lands, but taken away some cart loads of their young apple trees and planted them in their own lands. And when some of those Indians made some attempts to plant (by order from authority) upon their own lands in the spring 1677, some person of that place

expressly forbid them, and threatened them if they came there to oppose them, so that the poor Indians being put into fears returned, and dared not proceed; and yet those Indians that went to plant were such as had been with the English all the war, and were not at all obnoxious. (456)

Similarly, John Eliot, at the outset of *Indian Dialogues*, demands: “suffer not the English to strip them of all their lands, in places fit for the sustenance of the life of man” (60). Such emphasis on the rights of Indian Puritans is certainly not expressive of religious tolerance, let alone intercultural perspectivism (Eliot is, after all, asking for a strictly controlled *Christian* Native settlement), but neither can Eliot’s *Dialogues* be quoted in support of the quasi-Marxist understanding of theological discourse as a vehicle justifying unchecked colonization. The influence of Calvinist theology on the process of European colonial expansion in the New World should rather be seen in terms of a contingent, often contested, and sometimes even counterdynamic interaction. In the following, I want to trace some of the contingencies, contestations, and counterdynamics that mark the relationship of American Calvinism and seventeenth-century colonialism in John Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues*.¹⁵

III

John Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues* appeared in 1671, four years before the war that would irrevocably demolish Indian-English relations in the New World. Like most seventeenth-century documents, Eliot’s text is an exquisitely overdetermined one. The main obstacle the *Dialogues* present to a modern reader springs from the hybrid nature of their intended audience. We can distinguish at least three different groups addressed by Eliot. To begin with, there are “the Commissioners of the United Colonies in New England” (59), i.e. the colonial administrators responsible for funding the Indian mission. First and foremost, Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues* must thus be read as an attempt to justify the missionary actions undertaken so far and as a petition for further financial subvention. Additionally, the *Dialogues* are addressed to Puritan missionaries (possibly even Indian converts),¹⁶ advising them “what might or should have been said, or [what] may be (by the Lord’s assistance) hereafter done and said, upon the like occasion” (61). Beyond its more immediate aim of

fund-raising, Eliot’s book thus provides a primer for conversion, based on personal experience: an idealized blueprint for missionary work from which we can infer what the actual encounters between Puritan ministers and Native Americans may have looked like. Finally, the *Indian Dialogues* are written for a Protestant readership at large, both in America and England. There are various passages whose concerns go beyond the issue of Indian conversion and deal with more general, so to speak trans-local, themes such as the state of the Reformation in Europe or the Protestant fight against “Papist” heresies. Even those subjects, however, are put forth by Native American speakers. In the entire work, there is not one character that is presented as speaking in a European voice.¹⁷

This exclusive presence of Indian characters should, of course, not be taken as a sign of Eliot’s willingness to give voice to the Other. There may be no Western speakers in the *Indian Dialogues*, but it is all Western talk. Nevertheless, Native American perceptions do find their way into these white *Dialogues* by way of distillation and refraction. Needless to say, the conversations drawn up by Eliot are fictional. But given the text’s function as a sort of educational handbook, the Indians speaking here, especially the ones *resisting* evangelical labor, can certainly be taken as representative types, voicing objections and doubts that Eliot must have frequently encountered in his work as a missionary (see Bowden and Ronda 41). It is important, in this context, to consider not only the hybridity of Eliot’s intended audience, but also to recognize his characters and their utterances as overdetermined rhetorical figures. These *Indian Dialogues*, then, are no more “Indian” than they present real “dialogues”—and yet Eliot’s title has some justification. While we can always hear the missionary’s voice sounding through the words of his Indian converts (Piumbukhou, Anthony, and William act literally as Eliot’s mouthpieces), the presentation of the Native Americans’ struggle both for and against an understanding of Puritan dogma bears witness to an intercultural exchange that was likely characterized by serious efforts at mutual comprehension.¹⁸ One may not want to go as far as James Ronda who describes the clash of religious systems in the New World as a “genuine theological debate” between two coequal parties (76), but there can be no doubt that the Indians did have their say in the dialogue

of conversion—and part of their position and voice can indeed be gleaned from Eliot’s idealized description of that interaction.

Therefore, it seems essential for our understanding of intercultural encounter in the seventeenth century that we get beyond currently fashionable patterns of interpretation that tend to divide cultural groups into active aggressors and passive victims. In the case of the colonization of New England, the materialist “coercion” model, which regards Puritan evangelical discourse as little more than an instrument of oppression, implemented against the hopeless resistance of the Natives, serves to trivialize not only the relationship between English economic interests and Protestant religious faith but also the inherent complexities of Indian conversion. While there can be no doubt that Native American acculturation frequently took place as a desperate last attempt at cultural self-determination, it would be disingenuous to interpret Indian acceptance of Western forms of faith merely as a colonized people’s strategy of physical survival. Native “signifying” gestures, it seems, were generally accompanied by feelings of cultural dislocation that prevented more partisan forms of political resistance. As Robert James Naeher suggests, Puritan dogma—with its emphasis on the meaning of affliction, psychological trauma, and final redemption through self-abasement—was indeed able to provide the Indians with a sense of comfort and meaning in a period of severe spiritual anxiety and cultural confusion.¹⁹ Native conversion experiences therefore should not be reduced to “strategic” gestures of pretended adaptation. Moreover, the “coercion” model fails to account for the actual political structure that determined Indian daily life in Eliot’s praying towns. Elise Brenner has shown how Native “strategies for cultural autonomy” brought about “a pattern of mutual exploitation” even in the most visibly coercive of socio-cultural environments (136).²⁰ Last but not least, we should neither rule out the possibility of an authentic and subjectively sincere Christian conversion experience on the part of Native American believers.

The remainder of this paper will attempt a reading of John Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues* against the background of these issues, concentrating particularly on the first dialogue. Structurally, we can subdivide the entire work into four independent parts, the first and third presenting a successful conversion, the second and fourth serving as a short coda that

repeats the teachings of the previous dialogue in the form of a catechism. (Eliot himself divides his text into only three segments, but the concluding conversation between “John” and an Indian “penitent” clearly acts as a separate part.) The first dialogue starts with the accidental roadside meeting of Piumbukhou, a praying Indian, and his yet unconverted “Kinsman.” The latter inquires about Piumbukhou’s “new way of living,” more out of curiosity than a desire for instruction, as it seems: “there [are] such various reports, some commending, some condemning, some deriding, some wondering. But so far I see few desire to imitate you” (64).²¹ A conversation ensues in which the kinsman is not only supplied with information about Piumbukhou’s new life as a praying Indian but is actually persuaded to take on such a life himself. Significantly, the dialogue between Piumbukhou and his kinsman advances along an intellectual as well as a socio-geographical line, which is to say that the pupil’s education is paralleled by the two men’s journey to the kinsman’s village. And it is here, where the dialogue between two individuals metamorphoses into a communal event, that the conversion process is brought to a triumphant close. Eliot thus prescribes a clearly defined method of progression for the missionary course, moving his figures from (1) an individual sphere (Piumbukhou’s conversation with his kinsman) to (2) a communal sphere (Piumbukhou’s conversation with the villagers) to (3) a political sphere (Piumbukhou’s conversation with the sachem). Within each of these spheres, the Indian missionary confronts and finally neutralizes typical doubts and objections. A closer look at the nature of these resistances reveals the complex interaction of Puritan theology, colonial policies, and Indian socio-cultural realities.

1. *The Individual Sphere.* The first question encountered by Piumbukhou concerning his new faith is:

Doth your praying to God exempt you from sickness, poverty, nakedness? Will praying to God fill you with food, gladness, and garments?
(65)

This question reflects what seems to have been a characteristic and widespread concern among Native Americans. In fact, Piumbukhou’s debate with *utilitarian* interpretations of religious practice can be regarded as the secret leitmotiv of the entire dialogue, running from this first inquiry to the final criticisms voiced by Sontim, the village’s sa-

chem. There are two reasons for this: on the one hand, the kinsman's interest in the material consequences of praying can be taken as yet another indication of the *pragmatic* nature of Native religion. But Piumbukhou's interlocutor does not only inquire about the direct effects of this new ritual; his words also imply a question of the following sort: "What's in it for me if I should switch my religious allegiances?" His belief in the pragmatic nature of religious practice in general is therefore supplemented by, and has to be distinguished from, his interest in the *economic benefits of Christianity in particular*. From the start, then, Piumbukhou (a white voice more than an Indian one in this case) is faced with an essential dilemma that will pervade all his further attempts at conversion: his Indian interlocutors perceive an intimate connection between the English way of worship and the material superiority of English culture. (In the passage quoted, the kinsman's concern with "clothing" has to be read as a conventional metonymic reference to "civilization.") Initially, Native interest in Christian theology is thus intricately interwoven with Native interest in English technology.²²

The Native refusal to distinguish between Western culture and Western religion presents a dilemma for the missionary precisely because of the Puritans' fundamental distinction between false (material) security and true (self-abasing) salvation. It would have been easy to coax the Indians into adherence to Christian form and ritual if the Puritans had been willing to reinforce the Native assumption of religion as an immediate expression of culture (and a direct key to civilization). But Puritan theology demanded that Native Americans had to learn, as their first lesson, that the very reasons why Christianity appealed to them were wrong; Piumbukhou's answer to his kinsman's question tellingly runs:

if praying to God did bring with it outward plenty and worldly prosperity, then all carnal people would pray to God, not because they love God, or praying to God, but because they love themselves, and love food, clothing, and worldly pleasures. But the benefits of praying are spiritual and heavenly, it teaches us to know God, and the evil of sin. (65–66)

This must have been a hard pill to swallow. Moreover, Piumbukhou's reference to "the evil of sin" does not so much answer as rebuke his kinsman's question. True, Piumbukhou goes on to make the concession that "religion doth teach the right way to be rich and prosperous in

this world, and many, English especially, have learned that way" (66)—but these words only serve to underline the tension between Protestant dogma and colonial economic policies, because they are obviously meant to anticipate a possible objection that might ask, "if this is so, how come the English are so prosperous?"

It is, therefore, in no way coincidental that Eliot's very first lesson concerns the concept of sin. As James Naeher writes, "if the missionaries were to succeed at all, they had first to implant in the Indians a sense of sin and guilt that could not be absolved by human means and that Christianity alone could alleviate" (351). Thus, what the Indians were asked to grasp was not so much the thought that individual wrongdoing would be punished by divine intervention (this idea apparently presented a traditional part of their own religious belief-system),²³ but the notion that "sin" describes a *state of being* rather than an action. In other words, when Piumbukhou praises "the knowledge of the evil of sin" as a prime result of praying, he is, in effect, telling his kinsman that individual conduct—e.g. the acceptance of justified punishment or even the deliberate refrainment from criminal activity—is by no means able to bring about salvation. Action and faith are here as separated as are material and spiritual well-being: one cannot be achieved via the other. In that sense, Piumbukhou's reference to "the knowledge of the evil of sin" really does present an answer to the kinsman's question about the economic benefits of conversion, but an answer that effectively cancels out that question—and with it the converttee's belief in a synchronicity of cultural and religious conversion. This becomes evident in the way the dialogue continues.

2. *The Communal Sphere*. Eliot never tells his readers how Piumbukhou's kinsman comes to accept the paradoxical premises of the Puritan *ordo salutis* (the idea of overcoming sinfulness by recognizing and hating its ineluctable presence in one's own self—hating oneself, that is—instead of avoiding sinful activity by force of individual will and action). At this point of the conversion process, it seems sufficient that the converttee *senses* rather than comprehends the compelling truth of Piumbukhou's cryptic answer. In the words of the kinsman: "These are great and strange things you speak of. I understand them not. But yet methinks there is a majesty and glory in them. I am amazed at what you

say, though I do not understand them distinctly” (68). Thus endowing Christian theology with a mysterious sublimity, Eliot’s fictional Indian is already well on his way to final conversion—and already acts, quite in spite of himself, as a spokesman of the mission. As a result, the circle of conversation now has to widen, the two men reach the village, and Piumbukhou confronts communally uttered objections. The first of these objections repeats the question of economic benefits with a difference. It is a “Kinswoman,” emerging from tribal festivities (“merry meeting, and dancing”), who asks:

I pray cousin, how doth your wife, my loving kinswoman, is she yet living? And is she not weary of your new way of praying to God? And what pleasure have you in those ways? (69)

Piumbukhou’s answer predictably points to the difference between physical and spiritual contentment. This time, however, he expands his argument and explains that the sensual pleasures so cherished by his kinswoman indicate the corruption—and that means: *mortality*—of bodily existence. Piumbukhou’s earlier teachings on sin are thus supplemented by a characteristically Puritan *memento mori*, and the original sinfulness of the Indians’ “pleasures of lusts” (70) is revealed as the finality of their physical existence (human mortality being a direct consequence of the fall). While the kinsman, already under the plain if mysterious spell of Christian truth, shows himself much impressed, the kinswoman remains unconvinced and openly ridicules Piumbukhou.²⁴ So much seems clear: if the Puritan notion of existential sinfulness acted as a stumbling block to Indian convertees, then the complementary idea of affliction as a *necessary* stage on the way to salvation (and death as a *deliverance* from sinful worldliness) must have presented an all but insurmountable obstacle to conversion.²⁵

Yet the paradoxes of the Puritan *via negativa* necessarily took on a certain amount of plausibility, possibly even a consolatory power, once the Indians’ world had indeed been turned into a living hell—a point that was reached when the “afflictions” to be feared started to exceed the temporary sufferings of wars and natural catastrophes and concerned the survival of their entire social environment. Precisely such a severe disruption of traditional patterns of social organization and cultural self-understanding occurred in result of their clash with a society whose

technological supremacy manifested itself, among other things, in the power of *literacy* and *print*. Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues* suggest that the Indians’ initial amalgamation of English theology and English civilization also determined their reaction to the unfamiliar concept of *scripted* religion. Significantly, most Native Americans seem to have regarded the Bible as a mixture of magical object and technological product—if not as a cunningly devised weapon.²⁶ The second objection that Piumbukhou is faced with at the communal level has to be seen in this context. It resolutely formulates an astonishing critique of Western religion. The kinsman proclaims:

My heart trembles to hear these things. I never heard so much before, nor have I any thing to say to the contrary, but that these things may be so. But how shall I know that [*sic*] you say is true? Our forefathers were (many of them) wise men, and we have wise men now living. They all delight in these our delights. They have taught us nothing about our soul, and God, and heaven, and hell, and joy and torment in the life to come. Are you wiser than our fathers? May not we rather think that English men have invented these stories to amaze us and fear us out of our old customs, and bring us to stand in awe of them, that they might wipe us of our lands, and drive us into corners, to seek new ways of living, and new places too? And be beholding [*sic*] to them for that which is our own, and was ours, before we knew them. (71)

Part of the exceptionality of this statement stems from the fact that Eliot actually included it in his primer for conversion. Obviously, the author of the *Indian Dialogues* did not feel he would undermine his own position if he quoted such a strong and compelling critique of the Puritan mission. What we find here, after all, is nothing less than a detailed anticipation of Jennings’s interpretation of religion as an instrument of socio-economic control.²⁷ To modern readers, Eliot’s deliberate inclusion of such a powerful critique mainly seems to reveal his own naiveté concerning the political status of the American mission. And yet, upon inspection, the presence of proto-Marxist *Ideologiekritik* in a seventeenth-century conversion dialogue is not as surprising as it first appears—because from a Puritan perspective, the kinsman’s objection is neither compelling nor dangerous. Instead, it must have appeared as simply nonsensical. Here is how Piumbukhou answers the suspicion of his compatriots that the Bible may be a tool of colonial exploitation:

The Book of God is no invention of Englishmen. It is the holy law of God himself, which was given unto man by God, before the Englishmen

had any knowledge of God; and all the knowledge which they have, they have it out of the Book of God. And this book is given to us as well as to them, and it is as free for us to search the scripture as for them. So that we have our instruction from a higher hand, than the hand of man. It is the great Lord God of heaven and earth, who teacheth us these great things of which we speak. (71)

Modern readers may tend to regard these sentences as unconvincing and logically fallacious (the refutation seems to be based on a circular argument, confronting doubts about the authenticity of the Bible with statements about the truth of the Bible), but we have to take Piumbukhou's answer seriously. What seems particularly striking is that Eliot's praying Indian fails to perceive his kinsman's objection as a *political* one. His answer does not pertain to the *function* of the Bible in the colonial process but to the Bible's *cultural origin*. Here, however, the case is clear: the Indians' identification of biblical doctrine with English colonial policies is unfounded *because the Bible is not an English book*. The implications of this answer for our understanding of the role of Protestant discourse in the process of colonization are essential. Four points should be noted:

(i) Piumbukhou's insistence that the Bible is not an English book amounts to an elementary distinction between the message of the gospel and its English messengers—or, more abstractly put, an elementary distinction between Christian religion and Western culture. The truth of the Scriptures is not established by Western civilization but by the—*trans-ethnically* and *transculturally* defined—"great Lord of heaven and earth." In other words, missionary instruction does not actually come from the English, but from "a higher hand." The European settlers are merely the fallible medium of divine revelation. (It has become something of a critical habit to attend to the "instrumentalization" of Native Americans in early American discourse, but the cultural relevance of this rhetorical gesture will remain misunderstood as long as it is not placed in the context of the Puritan tendency towards *self-instrumentalization*.)

(ii) If, in the eyes of the missionaries, Christian truth exists separate from and independent of its European proponents, then Western *culture* has to be perceived as a vehicle for *religious* transmission and not vice versa. As a result, Eliot implicitly argues, Indian converts cannot be ex-

cluded from the religious community on grounds of their cultural or ethnic difference. Again, this interpretation of the role and function of missionary activity in the New World reveals Eliot's blindness to the factual socio-political contexts he was working in, but it also refutes an instrumental understanding of Protestant discourse.

(iii) Piumbukhou's answer implies that the only possibility of a political or economic instrumentalization of the Bible consists in heretically perverting the divinely given Word. When, later in the *Dialogues*, the Catholic use of the Bible is criticized, this criticism tellingly speaks both of a non-use (by repression) and a mis-use (by textual changes) of scripted truth:

Here be two ways of wronging the scriptures: 1. By adding to it; 2. By taking from it. Now these popish teachers and ministers of whom I did discourse before, they do most wickedly wrong the scriptures, especially by adding to them. They say that their offices are commanded in the scripture, and that the Pope is Christ his vicar, and that he hath power to pardon sin, and abundance more such rotten stuff they add unto the scripture. Now this is another reason why they will not suffer people to read the scriptures, because then everybody would find out their false dealing. And therefore if anybody find them out, they will presently kill them. The great wrong they do unto the scriptures of truth is one of their great sins. They add their own wicked inventions unto the pure and perfect Word of God. (141)

These sentences are spoken by an *Indian* character against *European* malefactors. The line that separates truth from untruth, godliness from blasphemy, obviously cuts across cultural and ethnic divides. Similarly, Piumbukhou's assertion that the Bible is given to the Indians in the same manner as it was given to the English and that "it is as free for us to search the scripture as for them" contains a potent challenge to the colonial discourse of *ethno-cultural* supremacy. In that sense, one may even be tempted to read Eliot's elementary distinction between biblical truth and its English transmission as a means of religiously empowering Native American culture against its European counterpart—a means of empowerment, however, that was never allowed to live up to its potential.

(iv) If there really is such a counterdynamic potential of transcultural and transethnic criticism in Christian missionary discourse, it is rooted precisely in the normative status of *writing*. The convertee of the third dialogue asks what "scripture" means. He is answered:

The word and will of God written in a book, whereby we not only hear it with our ears, when it is spoken by others, but we may see it with our eyes, and read the writing ourselves. And this is a great benefit to us, to have God's word and will written. For a word spoken is soon gone, and nothing retaineth it but our memory, and that impression which it made upon our mind and heart. But when this word is written in a book, there it will abide, though we have forgotten it. (139)

The written word not only acts as an aid to memory here, but also guarantees the immutability of doctrine and hence, in the eyes of John Eliot, the preservation and essential *incorruptibility* of *scriptura*. We should not forget that according to Protestant belief, the written and printed Word (i.e. truth preserved and disseminated) stands in irreconcilable opposition to the political power-interests of both clerical and secular elites. Repeatedly, the *Indian Dialogues* stress that the best way of preventing political abuse of the Bible consists in securing the unchecked *accessibility* of the written word to as many readers as possible—including, especially, non-Western readers. This is how we have to understand Eliot's conviction that the heathens must be "civilized" before they can be converted: only their ability to read will provide entry into the transcultural and transethnic truth of scriptural authority and thus prevent them from material and intellectual exploitation. This, and not a colonialist desire of dispossession, is the reason why Eliot, with the publication of dictionaries, grammars, catechisms, and finally an Indian Bible, found it necessary to transform Algonkian into a written dialect and teach the Indians how to *read* their own language (after they had taught him how to speak it).²⁸

In sum, it can be said that the recently popular indictment of Christian missionary discourse as a tool of socio-economic exploitation (especially concerning the Protestant emphasis on the transmission of *written* doctrine) is not borne out by the missionary documents themselves. Instead, texts like Eliot's *Indian Dialogues* attest to numerous tensions between Puritan theology on the one hand and New England colonialism on the other. This also becomes obvious in the last objection Piumbukhou encounters at the level of communal Indian critique. The village, in univocal voice, refers to the persecution of Puritans in the Old World and declares: "It is an ill time for you to come to persuade us to pray to God, when praying to God is so opposed, hated, and hindered [in Europe]" (74). In the same context, they inquire: "Some speak of very

many English people [at Boston] killed with thunder, and many burnt in their houses. Is it so indeed?" (75). Piumbukhou again answers this by distinguishing between the English and their Christian God. Missionary and Indian voice overlap, as do Eliot's New England and his Native American audience, when the convert proclaims:

We know there be many sins among the English, which provoke God to be angry with them, and to punish them, to the end he might bring them to repentance. When we exhort you to pray, and to serve the God of the English, we call you to imitate the virtues and good ways of the English, wherein you shall be acceptable to the Lord. We do not call you to imitate their sins, whereby they and you shall provoke the anger and displeasure of the Lord. (75)

3. *The Political Sphere*. Night falls and gives the community an opportunity to reflect on the evangelical message it has received. In full accordance with the conventions of traditional conversion narratives, the convertees do not find much sleep; their thoughts are "troubled" and their hearts "[in] great strife" (while Piumbukhou awakens "well refreshed"). Piumbukhou's kinsman, representing the community at large, has gone through his dark night of the soul and is obviously ready for conversion now. But while he openly acknowledges the truth of Christian dogma, he still fears the practical consequences of the conversion he desires:

I think your way is right. I cannot gainsay any thing of which you discoursed. But on the other side, if I should forsake our former ways, all my friends would rise up against me like a stream too strong for me to stand against, and I am not able to defend myself against them. I do not know what to do.

It should be noted that this objection is no longer theological in nature. The proselyte's fear of social isolation rather raises a question concerning the *political* framework of Indian conversion. And as such it is understood by Piumbukhou, who answers: "We shall endeavor to convince and persuade all your friends to turn unto God also, and then that temptation will quite sink" (82).²⁹ The conversion process thus finds its logical culmination in the missionary's confrontation with established Native power structures (i.e. sachem and powwow). This confrontation centers around one single concern: the power of *tradition*. In what to modern readers may be the most impressive speech in the entire work, the village's powwow declares:

Let me add a few words to give check to your high-flown confidence to your new way, and new laws, and to your deep censoriousness of our old ways, the pleasancy and delight whereof everyone, both man, woman, and child, can judge of. And we cannot but dislike to have such pleasant delights taken from us. Tear our hair from our heads, our skin from our flesh, our flesh from our bones, you shall as soon persuade us to suffer you to do by us, as to persuade us to part with our old delights and courses. You tell us of the Englishmen's God, and of his laws. We have Gods also, and more than they. And we have laws also by which our forefathers did walk, and why should not we do as they have done? To change our Gods, and laws, and customs, are great things, and not easily to be obtained and accomplished. Let us alone, that we may be quiet in the ways which we like and love, and we let you alone in your changes and new ways. (87)

Again, one is struck by Eliot's apparent blindness to the aptness of this kind of reasoning. We can certainly take his innocent inclusion of the powwow's speech as a sign of the totalitarian nature of Puritan doctrine (so assured of its own truth that it does not even recognize the threat posed by such criticism), but given the dialogue's overall argument, another point seems more pertinent: Piumbukhou's answer to this speech again exclusively concentrates on the powwow's reference to "the *Englishmen's* God." Once more the confrontation between Indian and Christian religious practice is recast, not as a confrontation between two different "traditions" (or cultures), but as a transcultural struggle based on eschatological distinctions: "We teach you to know the true God, who can kill us, or keep us alive at his pleasure. Your gods shall all perish with you, for they are no gods" (88). Socio-political objections are thus reduced to theological dogma. But while this strategy of elementary distinction, at the level of communal concerns, was still able to expose a potentially anti-supremacist position within Christian discourse, at the level of colonial power politics, Eliot's Protestant perspective signally fails to realize its own critical promises.

This becomes particularly obvious in the third dialogue, which presents a logical sequel to Piumbukhou's teachings, taking up Eliot's argument where it was left off in the first dialogue. Instead of one, we have now two praying Indians, and their missionary energy is directed exclusively towards a resisting representative of the political establishment (supposedly none other than King Philip—which adds a supreme irony to this dialogue's representation of successful conversion). Tellingly, Philip has no theological objections to make, but merely expresses his

fear that Christianization would deprive him of the economic wealth, social status, and political power he presently enjoys. As far as religious doctrine is concerned, then, the third dialogue does not seem to provide anything new: the missionaries' task again consists in displacing the convert's suspicions by translating material cultural concerns into transcultural answers. And yet, there is a difference in the way this translation is achieved when the neophyte is a sachem. Eliot's decision to split up his missionary mouthpiece into two voices—Anthony and William—is significant here. In fact, it turns out that we are faced with two different *characters*, each offering substantially different reasons for conversion. When, for example, Philip asks if he will not be "a great loser by praying to God," because many of his people will desert him, Anthony predictably answers, "I confess this is a strong temptation, and requireth much self-denial and faith to conflict with it. . . . But if all your men should forsake you, and yet you choose Christ, and be true to him, then Christ will certainly take care of you" (124). This answer is without question the theologically correct one, but it serves to corroborate rather than to dispel Philip's fears. Anthony's "younger brother" William, however, is right on the mark when he tells Philip that a switch of religious allegiances, far from depriving the sachem of his influence, will entail his association with the strongest political power in the world—the King of England himself will become his military ally (or at least "take notice" of him):

Again, suppose you lose a few subjects that hate praying to God, but yet you shall gain a more intimate love of the Governor, and Magistrates, and good people of Plymouth, who were ever good friends to your father Onsamequin, and to you hitherto. But if you pray to God, you shall find deference. They will more honor, respect, and love you, than ever they did. They will embrace you as a brother in Jesus Christ. Yea, farther, the Governor and Magistrates of the Massachusetts will own you, and be fatherly and friendly to you. The commissioners of the United Colonies will own you. Yea more, the King of England, and the great peers who are heads of the Corporation there, who yearly send over means to encourage and promote our praying to God, they will take notice of you. And what are a few of your subjects that hate praying to God, in comparison of all these? (126)

Not only do these sentences sound like outright bribery, but their phrasing also betrays an ethnocentric arrogance that is conspicuously absent from other parts of Eliot's text. Throughout the third dialogue,

William thus steps in to take care of the material concerns that Philip raises—and that Anthony, always the Puritan convert, does not care to touch upon. True, the presentation of the two speakers, as well as the length of their speeches (with Anthony, the older one, always being the first to answer Philip's objections and William then shortly "adding" some words), leaves no doubt where Eliot puts his missionary priorities. Nevertheless, when the conversion of a political leader is at stake, theological doctrine obviously needs to be backed up by economic promises. On the one hand, the presence of William in the third dialogue can, of course, be traced back to the text's strategic function as a handbook for future missionaries. Arguments like the one quoted above, by deflecting from the Puritan emphasis on humility and abnegation, are meant to ease the sachem's transition from "pleasant" heathenism to "difficult" Christianity. On the other hand, however, Eliot's belief in the mere instrumentality of such socio-economic promises is at best naive. At worst, Eliot's naiveté can be regarded as willful and tragic self-delusion. The author of the *Indian Dialogues* is apparently unable to admit what is only too obvious, namely that from Philip's perspective, William's reasoning is the more compelling one. The mere necessity of such material backing considerably diminishes the supposed self-sufficiency of Eliot's theological message—and with it, the critical and counterdynamic potential of the transethnic perspective he has labored to establish throughout the *Dialogues*.

In conclusion it can be said that Eliot's inability to grasp the concrete socio-political function and effect of his missionary activity prevented his theological rhetoric of transethnic empowerment from actually affecting the cultural realities in the New World. The tragedy of the Puritan mission thus may consist not so much in its partnership in colonialist crime, but rather in its incapacity to become aware of even the possibility of such an alliance. The tragedy of the mission may consist in the very sincerity with which Eliot carried out his self-proclaimed Christian duty, taking seriously a faith that thought it could oppose political corruption by declaring itself immune to it. In the words of Neal Salisbury: "[Eliot's] unrealistic objectives blinded him to the full dimension of settler-Indian conflict, including his own role in that conflict" ("Red Puritans" 55). But graver than the tragedy of the mission was,

without doubt, the tragedy of the missionized. The years 1675–1677 marked the beginning of a radically new colonial policy towards the Indians; missionary rhetoric now more or less disappeared from official Puritan discourse and was replaced by an increasingly racist vocabulary of ethno-cultural supremacy (see Slotkin and Folsom 22). What did not disappear, however, were the "spiritual" results of Eliot's teachings. The fact that no less than 40 percent of the praying Indians of Massachusetts remained loyal to Christianity even after there were no more political or economic advantages to be expected—and, what is more, even after they had recognized that most of their English co-believers did not care to be associated with them any longer—attests not only, in the words of Bowden and Ronda, to "the power with which gospel precepts can sustain individuals living in a state of grace" (55) but also indicates something of the independent dynamics of religious faith in intercultural confrontations. Given the ambiguous political function of Christianity in later historical contexts—most notably in the African American struggle for political emancipation and socio-economic equality—it seems clear that simplistic materialist paradigms of interpretation which are based on partisan cultural binaries serve to impede rather than support an understanding of the contingent role played by religious convictions in the process of both colonization and decolonization.

If history is what remains, the question of how to read the past will always be imprinted with present-day ideological concerns. The current popularity of seventeenth-century texts of intercultural encounter (especially Indian captivity narratives but also supposedly non-orthodox missionary tracts such as *A Key into the Language of America*) can be taken as a case in point, for those genres, more than any other in colonial writing, seem to offer themselves to the construction of a usable multiculturalist past—if the author's heterodox credibilities are in order. The extreme representation of Mary Rowlandson and Roger Williams as early American precursors of postmodernist sensibilities thus goes hand in hand with the equally biased unmasking of, say, John Cotton and John Eliot as imperialist conquerors. As different as these authors are in political and theological position (with Williams closer to Eliot, and Rowlandson closer to Cotton than conventional groupings would seem to suggest), it is vital that we comprehend their *common* cultural-historical

situation as an indication of their *common* incompatibility with today's ideological requirements. Not only intellectual integrity but also political considerations should keep in check the widespread tendency to instrumentalize the past in the service of contemporary mythmaking and collective identification. As long as American colonial literature is used merely as a useful projectional field for the ideological battles of the present, it will indeed remain "anything but well explored."

Notes

I would like to thank Winfried Herget and the participants of his seminar on "Colonial Indian-White Encounters" (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, summer term 1997) for suggestions, discussions, and critique.

1. For the past as a "foreign country," see David Lowenthal.
2. For a discussion of the early nationalist canonization of seventeenth-century Puritan settlers, see Udo J. Hebel.
3. For a discussion of the emergence of a mythical image of Native American culture, see my reading of Philip Freneau's poem "The Indian Student" in "Indians' as Metonymy, Metaphor, and Myth." For a discussion of the topos of the "vanishing race," see Berkhofer, Jr. 86–96 and Lubbers 215–20.
4. For a detailed discussion of the Puritan theory of "vacuum domicilium" ("waste without inhabitants"), see Jennings, "Virgin Land," and Peacock.
5. For a discussion of the widespread Puritan view of Indians as devil worshippers instead of simply uneducated heathens, see Youngs, Jr. 242 and Holstun 113.
6. A good example of this tension between sacred hermeneutics and secular necessities can be found in one of the first descriptions of intercultural encounter in the book: stumbling upon a storage of Indian corn, Bradford's people freely supply themselves with the badly needed food. Bradford predictably offers a typological interpretation of the event: "And here is to be noted a special providence of God, and a great mercy to his poor people, that here they got seed to plant them corn the next year, or else they might have starved, for they had none nor any likelihood to get any." The question of who actually owns the corn seems to be conveniently avoided, for if the corn was placed by God, the taking of it cannot have been an act of theft. And yet Bradford is thoroughly aware of the pragmatic vicissitudes of the situation, namely of the fact that the Indians—potential trade-partners and military allies, after all—may have stored the corn for a purpose other than feeding the Christians. Therefore, he makes sure to include the following, rather peculiar remark: "Also there was found more of their corn and of their beans of various colours; the corn and beans [we] brought away, purposing to give them full satisfaction when [we] should meet with any of them as, about some six months afterwards [we] did, to their good content" (66). This insistence that the corn was not stolen but merely borrowed (or bought) would be unnecessary if Bradford's interaction with the Indians were guided by typological conviction alone. But an exclusive reliance on theological discourse is prevented in this case by Bradford's knowledge that he is dependent on Indian instruction in order to be able properly to plant and grow the seeds he has just "borrowed," with the help of God, from his future neighbors. A similar tension between typological imperatives and pragmatic demands can be found in the Puritan practice of land acquisition: while official ideology gave free reign to

the Protestant pilgrims, they nevertheless made sure that they obtained a legal title to their lands and lawfully bought them from the Indians. See Vaughan 104–21. For a discussion of the role of *Realpolitik* from an Indian perspective, see Metcalf.

7. Naeher counts 1,100 Native Americans living in the fourteen Indian “praying towns” established by John Eliot between 1646 and 1674.

8. Bowden and Ronda, eds., *John Eliot's Indian Dialogues: A Study in Cultural Interaction* (1980) 59; hereafter quoted parenthetically.

9. The debate concerned the “origin” of the Indians; their status in eschatological history depended directly on the question whether they should be seen as Gentiles or Jews. While John Cotton held the Native Americans to be a separate people, Puritan missionaries like John Eliot were forced to consider the possibility of their descent from one of the “lost tribes” of Israel—a theory put forward by Thomas Thorowgood in *Iewes in America* (1650) and famously anticipated by Roger Williams in *A Key into the Language of America* (1643). For Thorowgood's influence on Eliot, see Holstun 110–15 and Huddleston.

10. A good comparison between Jesuit and Puritan missionary practices can be found in Hertrampf 33–62.

11. See Ronda 81. For a discussion of precontact religion in America, see also Salisbury, “The Indians' Old World.”

12. See Youngs, Jr. 242; Holstun 113; Jennings, “Goals and Functions”; and Salisbury, “Red Puritans.” It should be noted that the deconstruction of an “altruistic” image of Puritan missionaries frequently challenges the assumption of sincere Indian conversion. Youngs, for instance, stresses the material interests at work in the decision of Native Americans to embrace Christianity. According to this view, Indians switching their religious and cultural allegiance mainly sought to raise their socio-economic status by associating themselves with the victorious powers in the Pequot War. For partly divergent opinions, see Ronda 76 and Vancura.

13. The confrontation with Indian powwows turned out to be far less conciliatory, of course: the representatives of both religious castes from the beginning recognized each other as threatening opponents (see Bowden and Ronda 15).

14. Gookin's favorite rhetorical strategy consists in switching ethnic perspectives while firmly holding on to Christian discourse. Thus the praying Indians and their “English neighbours” (quite an unusual point of view) suddenly attain equal status before the transethnic truth of religious dogma (Gookin 434). Eliot, in his preface to Gookin's volume, even invokes the culturally impartial gaze of the Christian deity in order not to have to assess the conduct of the English settlers towards converted Indians himself (and it seems clear what his—and His—opinion would be): “[H]ere is enough to give wise men a taste of what hath passed. Leave the rest unto the day of judgment, when all the contrivances and actings of men shall be opened before the seeing eye of a glorious Judge”

(Gookin 431). For a detailed analysis of Gookin, see Galinsky, “I cannot join with the multitude.”

15. For a fascinating rhetorical analysis of this little-read work—including a discussion of the theatrical dimension of the *Dialogues* and the metrical intricacies of their language—see Galinsky, *Geschichte amerikanischer Kolonial-literatur* 291–307.

16. In the preface of the *Dialogues*, Eliot announces his determination eventually to translate “these or the like dialogues in the Indian tongue” (61)—a project which would become obsolete with the outbreak of King Philip's War.

17. Therefore, not all of these “general” themes can be described as strictly translocal: an important substratum of motifs deals more or less directly with the “universal” spiritual meaning of the Puritan settlement in North America. And as Puritan typology is expounded by (imagined) *Indian* speakers, Eliot's eschatological message always implies certain moral directives concerning the colonists' behavior towards the Natives. So it is specifically for a *New England* audience that Eliot makes Piumbukhou say: “[W]e have great cause to be thankful to the English, and to thank God for them. For they had a good country of their own, but by ships sailing into these parts of the world, they heard of us, and of our country, and of our nakedness, ignorance of God, and wild condition. . . . And being come hither, we gave them leave freely to live among us. They have purchased of us a great part of those lands which they possess. They love us, they do us right, and no wrong willingly. If any do us wrong, it is without the consent of their rulers, and upon our complaints our wrongs are righted. They are (many of them, especially the ruling part) good men, and desire to do us good” (72). These *Puritan* sentences are, by way of their fictitiously *Indian* enunciation, spoken normatively to a white American readership (“especially the ruling part”)—a readership whose majority, Eliot obviously suspects, may not be as righteous in its moral and legal conduct as is prescribed by Piumbukhou's supposedly descriptive statements.

18. As Vancura shows, Eliot's Native interlocutors did indeed put a great deal of energy and intellectual subtlety into their attempt to understand, question, and, in some cases, accept Puritan religion. Vancura finds two prevalent attitudes among the Indians of New England: “intellectual scepticism and emotional disturbance” which both “testify abundantly to the Indians' receptivity to the new teaching” (85). This reading seems to be corroborated at least by the *representation* of the process of conversion in the *Indian Dialogues*. Eliot makes sure to portray Indian skeptics not as ignorant infants but as searching minds, rationally probing into the sense and seeming nonsense of Christian “mysteries.” As Piumbukhou's unconvinced kinsman puts it: “Wise men will look before they leap” (83). Apart from reflecting the realities of missionary encounters, however, this “intellectualizing” of the Indians may also fulfill a certain strategic function in Eliot's text, because a triumph over rationally expressed doubt certainly serves to augment the philosophical glamour of Christian truths. Furthermore,

Eliot's presentation of the Indians' intellectual resistance followed by an eventual intellectual acceptance is obviously meant to counter ethnic prejudices among his countrymen, so detrimental to his missionary endeavors. Finally, the presence of two parties exchanging *rational* arguments must be seen as a compulsory requirement of the dialogue-genre in general.

19. For a divergent reading, arguing that "the transference of the dominant culture was most complete" where "the traditional culture was most intact," see Simmons, "Conversion" 218.

20. Brenner argues that even in the context of an administrative space thoroughly Christian in origin, the Indians managed to develop "strategies of self-determination" that often remained invisible or incomprehensible to the colonial bureaucracies (140). Brenner's interpretation, however, while opposing a simplistic understanding of cultural power as mere "imposition," seems to be driven by the (understandable) desire to assign a certain subversive appeal to the losers of the colonizing process. This appears problematic because some of the "strategies" she names can be identified as deliberate colonial policies: both the Indians' self-administration in everyday affairs (resulting in "the maintenance of traditional leadership roles" [142]) and their relative military autonomy (resulting in the alliance of a number of praying towns with King Philip) were so intended by the English authorities and did not spring from covert Indian resistance. Perhaps one should not underestimate the theo-utopian nature of the Indian settlement enterprise, as it found expression in Eliot's *The Christian Commonwealth: or the Civil Polity of the Rising Kingdoms of Jesus Christ* (1661). (The praying towns were based on Mosaic rather than colonial ideas of social organization, drawn from Exodus 18.25.) Kenneth M. Morrison, like Naeher and Brenner, regards Indian conversion as an attempt at consolation in a time of crisis but paints a bleaker picture of Native American life under the (frequently contradictory) strictures of colonial control and theological utopianism: "The praying towns never developed any organic sense of identity and became collectivities of frightened, disillusioned, and confused individuals searching for the community they had lost" (89).

21. The last sentence was apparently written with a missionary reader (and not "the Commissioners of the United Colonies in New England") in mind.

22. Numerous missionary reports stress the Indians' attempt to extrapolate technological information from Christian ministers. While Eliot and Gookin wanted to teach about the Bible, they found their listeners frequently more interested in matters of natural science, apparently believing that a culture's store of knowledge must be present in (and accessible by) each of its members, especially those of the religious establishment.

23. See note 11 above.

24. This setback, of course, is not included as an example of the Spirit's possible failure to work its charm on the heathens. Rather, the kinswoman's resistance insidiously serves to prove Puritan doctrine, being in accordance with

the traditional interpretation of woman as the primal source of sin and hence especially "weak" when confronted with sensual temptations.

25. In the fourth dialogue, "Penitent" is told by "John": "usually God doth afflict the heart with grief, out of great love. . . . It is God's usual way of grace, to put his lambs into distress" (150). The penitent of the second dialogue, after confessing, "I am afraid of myself," is answered by Waban: "*happy is the man who feareth always*" (108). See also Salisbury, "Red Puritans" 48.

26. For a fascinating account of Native American attitudes towards printed language, see Axtell.

27. Misgivings about the political intentions of the Christian mission seem to have been rather widespread among Native American convertees. James Ronda quotes an Algonquian politician named Agwachimagan who interprets the Puritan threat of hell as follows: "[Those] are fables, invented to inspire us with real fear of an imaginary fire; and, in the false hope of good that can never come to us, we involve ourselves in inevitable dangers" (76).

28. See Bowden and Ronda 27. To my knowledge, Eliot's *Mamusee Wunneetapanatamwe Up-Biblum God* (1663) still waits for an analysis that would combine theological, cultural-historicist, and linguistic expertise.

29. See also the second dialogue, where Waban quotes Luke 22.32: "*when thou are [sic] converted, then strengthen thy brother*" (107).

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