

The University of Texas at Austin

The Englishman's Greatest Burden:

Cognitive Dissonance

Sarah Beech

LAH 350 Drama in Jamestown

Dr. Wojciehowski

7 May 2018

Ever since the early fifteenth century, colonialism has etched its way into the forefront of the European agenda. With Spain and Portugal reaping the benefits of New World expedition, England began to desire such riches for herself. A story of civilization and colonial intrusion was thus bred out of European greed and was routinely justified by attempts to reverse the barbarous ways of living encountered in the foreign land. In the race to compete with its enemy, Spain, and to escape the poverty it lay entrenched in, England joined this colonial effort in the late 1500s (Kupperman 20). Englishmen began to venture across the Atlantic to reap the rewards of the virgin land it believed to be economically fruitful. The challenge of establishing colonies in the New World, however, posed a great feat for the English who faced the unexpected calamities of hurricane-induced shipwrecks, utter starvation, and native warfare. One of their greatest challenges, however, lay in the English struggle to grapple with the effects of cognitive dissonance—that is, the struggle to dominate and subsequently exploit a population of natives whom the English greatly relied on.

Since the onset of English colonial expedition by Sir Humphrey Gilbert in 1583, England grew a penchant for claiming the New World territory as its own. After arriving in Newfoundland, Gilbert immediately claimed the island for England and began a beloved practice that would pervade the English agenda for years to follow—claiming rightful possession over a foreign land regardless of those who dwelled on it. Edward Haile, historian and editor of *Jamestown Narrative—Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, explains that the upper east coast of the Americas, especially Virginia, became the focal point of English efforts to create a permanent, prosperous commonwealth. The English believed this commonwealth would provide them with plentiful “farms, fisheries, mines, and industries” as well as an elaborate system of trade with the native population (Haile 12). From the failed effort at Roanoke in 1590 to the

subsequent attempts to settle in Jamestown in the early 1600s, many Europeans were provided with the opportunity to venture to the New World for their own economic gain. The English began to set out on a multitude of expeditions following those of Gilbert and Sir Walter Raleigh (Haile 5-6). These expeditions brought together a diverse body of people including mathematicians, scholars, and artists, all of whom were sent to report on the perceived riches of the New World. Such expeditions, the English believed, would not only provide them with riches in timber, oils, dyes, furs, and metals, but would also help them fulfill the “Evangelical mission of Protestant Christianity” and provide them with an “outlet for a swelling of poor and unemployed” (Haile 12). Thus, the English colonial venture was viewed as a necessary extension of their power; it provided them with a means to evade their own poverty and misfortune back home. In voyaging to the New World, the English were given a chance to thrive in a new land that resembled one of promise and fortune. The virtues of this promise land were extolled and documented by many of the colonial travelers in their reports back to England. Colonial traveler William Brewster, in his *Letter from Virginia*, remarked that the land was “the most stately, rich kingdom in the world, never possessed by any Christian prince” (Haile 127) shortly after his visit to Virginia in 1607.

Justifying Colonial Intrusion

The psychological turmoil experienced by the English colonizers can only be appropriately explained by first accounting for their rationale in subjugating the native people. The feelings of superiority that led them to invade a land they lacked ultimate authority in drove them to dehumanize and condemn the subjects they were trying to conquer. Such dehumanization, I will later argue, remedies the psychological discomfort felt by the colonizers who were trying to control a body of people they greatly relied on. Moreover, the colonization of

the New World, despite the relative ease with which its mission was associated, proved to be a gruesome challenge for the Englishmen. They were attempting to uproot and control an entire population of natives who were ready to ardently fight for their homeland. Accordingly, the English sought to justify colonial intrusion by labeling the Powhatans they encountered in Virginia as “savages” who were in need of the uplifting they claimed English civilization would bring them. In order to understand the English insecurities that lead the colonizers to subjugate the natives in both word and deed, one must look to the English mindset and how it managed to justify colonial intrusion through claims of English superiority. From the start of their colonial venture, the English mastered the practice of justifying the atrocities they committed by labeling themselves as beneficent colonizers who were superior to the natives in both wit and skill. In fact, Thomas Harriot capitalized on this beneficence in his 1588 report which aimed to extoll Virginia’s virtues and encourage more settlers to partake in the trans-Atlantic colonial venture. It was common for explorers like Harriot to reference the Natives as “poor souls who [were] in need of [the English’s] gracious touch, a touch that will forever turn their backward ways around” (Harriot 72). Harriot’s line epitomizes the English attempt to justify colonial exploitation by relating their intrusion to a charitable deed meant to transform the natives and their “debauched” ways. His attempt to convince more English citizens to travel to Virginia after the failed Roanoke colony is replete with claims that champion English beneficence and superiority. In extolling English virtue, explorers like Harriot are purging from the English conscience any implications of wrongdoing that accompany the conquering and exploitation of a land filled with indigenous inhabitants.

The “Beneficent Mission” of the Colonizer

The European mindset of bestowing greatness upon a land of people that dearly needed it is similarly echoed in the language of other colonizers. Robert Johnson, a fellow promoter of colonial travel, answered the critics who viewed those traveling to Virginia as trespassers. His writing was published in the *American Colonial Tracts Monthly* in October 1897. The virtues of this publication are explained by its editor, George Humphrey, in the introduction to Johnson's work. Humphrey reveals that this publication sheds light on the "most valuable pamphlets relating to the early history of America" which had previously been inaccessible to the public. In *Nova Britannia: Offering most excellent fruits by planting in Virginia*, written in 1609, Johnson dispels his justification for colonial intrusion by explaining English intentions. He paints their intrusion in a positive light that was not intended to decimate indigenous life but "to bring them from their base condition to a far better" (Johnson 12). He continued to reveal, "as for supplanting the savages, we have no such intent...Our intrusion into their possession shall tend to their great good and no way to their hurt, unless as unbridled beasts they procure it to themselves" (Johnson 12). When analyzing the rhetoric of English explorers like Johnson, a power dynamic begins to divulge—the English routinely justified their colonial invasion by claiming to be a superior group of individuals who were graciously passing their civilized ways onto a people they regarded as "beasts." In fact, Hobson Woodward, writer of *A Brave Vessel*, argues that Johnson's work goes as far as promoting the idea that "descendants of the Powhatans would *thank* the English for the gift of the European way of life" (Woodward 16). Such European arrogance, coupled with a "might makes right" demeanor, influenced the English colonial encounter as its colonizers adopted a "Eurocentric bias." Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon delineates "Eurocentric bias" as a sort of inculcating predisposition in which Europeans believe they have the ability to master nature and control others (Bulhan 65). This bias greatly influenced

the English demeanor and subsequently their reactions to hardship in the New World. That is, the English showed dismay in the face of hardships wrought by a land they were ill-experienced to conquer. The expression of such shock illustrates their struggle to cope in a foreign climate that routinely denied them of the economic prosperity they expected.

Shattered Expectations

The shattering of English expectations once they arrived in the New World helps explain the insecurity that led them to habitually condemn the indigenes they relied on. The English were surrounded by gross exaggerations that falsified the extent to which they would find economic prosperity in the New World. Without experiencing the New World for themselves, the English at home could only rely on the misleading, exaggerated reports of those who embarked on the colonial voyage. The public's reality of what lay across the Atlantic was heavily skewed by early privateers like Christopher Newport, who were quick to remark in early reports that "Instead of milk we find pearl, and gold instead of honey [in Virginia]" (Haile 13). Playwrights like *Eastward Ho* even satirized the exaggeration of such riches prior to Virginia's first charter in 1606. Its author, Ben Jonson, poked fun at the colonial advocates who viewed the New World as a sort of Utopia in which a plethora of vast, great riches awaited the colonists (Kupperman 211). A character in the play, Captain Seagull echoes the prevailing sentiment of the English by exaggerating that "Gold is more plentiful there than copper is with us; and the more as much red copper as I can bring, I'll have thrice the weight in gold" (Jonson 35). Throughout these lines as well as the rest of the play, Jonson comments on English folly and its misrepresentation of the "riches" that lay in the New World. His parody foretells the dismay that is bound to follow a nation of people who expected to easily dominate an uncharted, unforgiving, and heavily-populated continent they knew little about. Hobson Woodward, author of *A Brave Vessel*,

comments that “ironically, as plays like *Eastward Ho* parodied dreams of Virginia treasure, they also raised the expectations of potential colonists” (Woodward 17). Such exaggerations were perpetuated when colonizers, such as Richard Rich, published in popular English newsletters (in 1610) that “there is no fear of hunger here, for corn much store here grows, much fish the gallant rivers yield” (Haile 377). It becomes easy to understand the consternation of those like William Strachey who subsequently arrived in Jamestown to find the colony struck by “famine and pestilence” (Haile 419). After Strachey and the other Bermuda castaways arrived in Virginia in 1610, they were dismayed by the effects of a winter of starvation that killed off most of the colonists—only ninety of the two hundred forty-five settlers were left alive (Woodward 101). These “starving times,” coupled with drought, native resistance, disease, and aversive weather conditions threatened the existence of a colony that was unmistakably dwindling away. Upon finding what Woodward calls “bands of skeletal people who had faced starvation,” (104) the colonizers were faced with a grim reality when they arrived in Virginia—a reality that stood in stark contrast to the utopic land idealized by an overzealous English nation.

An Unfortunate Dependency

The English colonials arrived in a land that not only challenged their wit, physical prowess, and endurance, but one that specifically threatened English superiority and the belief that they could easily conquer a foreign land and its indigenous population. Walter Hixson, a cultural historian and professor at the University of Akron, explains that “the first colonials in Virginia viewed the Indians as ‘heathen’ and ‘salvages,’ yet became dependent upon these supposedly inferior people for the basic human necessity of life: food. This unsettling dichotomy weighed on the psyches of the settlers” (Hixson 30). With a profound knowledge of the land and its natural resources, the native population in Virginia possessed unparalleled skills to which the

English could not dream of emulating. The English relied on the natives for food, sustenance, and land knowledge, especially during times of distress wrought by the unfavorable weather conditions that plagued the region. Even Powhatan, native ruler of the Virginia coastal plain (Haile 53), recognized that “he had a weapon more powerful than English guns: he could simply move away from contact with the colonists and deprive them of sustenance” (Kupperman 221). Powhatan’s realization epitomizes the ironic lack of control held by a power-hungry group of colonizers. The English were forced to surrender authority to a people they yearned to conquer. In establishing an inherent dependency on the indigenous population, the English experienced an uncomfortable shift in power that contradicted their domineering mission of taming and controlling the New World for themselves. In order to resolve the English insecurity bred by such conditions, the colonizers resorted to assert what little control they could through dehumanizing the native population.

The Role of Cognitive Dissonance and Dehumanization

Dehumanization was a tool used by the English to appease the cognitive dissonance they felt—the psychological discomfort—in trying to master a people they were not only cruel towards but dependent on. Cognitive dissonance is explained by Dr. Lauren Hamel as “the state of simultaneously holding two or more conflicting cognitions. The aversive state that an individual experiences during this time is described as dissonance and can cause a variety of uncomfortable feelings and emotions such as guilt, anger, or embarrassment” (Hamel 154). Dr. Hamel, a researcher on Organizational Behavior, explains this concept in the *Encyclopedia of Deception*. This definition explains that people are prone to experience discomfort when they are dealing with inconsistency or conflicting thoughts. For instance, an Englishman who arrives at Jamestown in 1610, only to find the town in ruins and hopelessly reliant upon the Powhatan

population, is likely to experience cognitive dissonance. The colonists, who were expected to both outwit and suppress the native threat, were forced to reconcile a tension created by two inconsistent beliefs—their superiority and unfortunate dependency. Thus, to create consistency and reconcile this tension, the English remedied their dissonance by employing the coping mechanism of dehumanization. If the natives were reduced to mere savages in their minds, the English could regain the control and superiority they lost and instead assert their dominance on a population they intended to civilize. Overall, the English utilized the strategy of dehumanization in two different ways—firstly to mask their dependency upon coming to a world riddled with unexpected hardship, famine, and warfare. Secondly, dehumanization allowed the colonizers to grapple with the atrocities they committed on the native population.

Dehumanization: A Tool Used to Mask English Dependency

To mitigate the discomfort in dominating a people they depended on for food and sustenance, the English resorted to frequent dehumanization to maintain their alleged superiority. Their verbal harangue allowed them to assert control over the situation and to mask the insecurities they harbored in their struggle to survive. The dehumanization that filled their language can be seen in many early accounts of native colonial encounters. Hixson, a cultural historian, elaborates on why the English felt the need to validate their asserted dominance through perpetual dehumanization. He cites the work of Homi Bhabha, an Indian English scholar who studied the role of “mimicry” in colonial discourse. In his work, *Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, Bhabha explains mimicry as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (126). Mimicry, Bhabha says, “is a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha 126). As articulated by Bhabha, mimicry was a rhetorical tool used

by English colonials to gain power through the separation of themselves from a primitive, “Other.” In explaining Bhabha’s theory on colonial ambivalence, Hixson articulates that “the supposedly all-powerful colonist actually depended on the supposedly totally subservient colonized subject in order to formulate his own identity (e.g., ‘I am white and civilized, he is brown and savage’). Rather than being fixed or monolithic, colonial identities therefore were constructed, unstable, and required constant repetition and affirmation in order to assert them as being real” (Hixson 3). Hixson and Bhabha’s analysis can be extended to the English colonial presence; the English colonizers’ sense of identity as superior individuals was contingent upon their continual degradation of the subjects they tried to conquer. The English resorted to denouncing the “barbaric,” “savage” natives to retain as much power over them as they could, even if such power existed solely in their linguistic portrayal of them. In fact, this dehumanization can be seen in the “us v. them” mentality adopted by most European colonizers. Sunil Bhatia, a human development researcher from Connecticut College, explains this mentality through the theory of orientalism. Bhatia states, “the beginnings of psychology are linked to a time when many European and American intellectuals had conceptualized the non-Western ‘Other’ as an inferior and ‘primitive’ savage” (Bhatia 381). Thus, Europeans like the English grew proficient in their ability to separate themselves from the “savages” they sought to control, exploit, and demean by labeling them as primitive “others.”

The Natives as “Savages”

Depictions of the natives as a savage, even devilish populace filled the early accounts of the colonial encounter as is evidenced with Thomas Harriot’s depictions in his *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Originally published in 1588 and later in 1590 with John White’s illustrations in the De Bry facsimile edition, Harriot consolidated a report for

England that aimed to extoll the virtues of Virginia and encourage their participation in the colonial encounter. Harriot had the job of boosting public morale in the face of the failed Roanoke colonies. B.J. Sokol, professor of English at the University of London, remarks that Harriot wrote in defense of Raleigh's Virginian enterprise by illuminating the potential economic prosperity of Virginia (Sokol 3). Paul Hulton, the modern editor of the 1972 Dover facsimile edition, writes in the introduction to Harriot's report that he was adamant in providing a detailed account of the commodities as well as the people, the "Southeastern Algonkians", who occupied the land (Harriot XIII). Harriot believed the English should know the truth behind the "untutored and malicious criticism" that discouraged colonial enterprise (Sokol 3). As Hulton states in his introduction, "Harriot seemed to have a special responsibility for studying the native Indians, and possibly he himself looked upon this as the most important aspect of his work" (Harriot IX). When describing the native populace, he characterized them as having "strange gestures, and often contrarie to nature in their enchantments: for they be verye familiar with devils, of whome they enquier what their enemys doe, or other such thinges" (Harriot 54). John White, whose illustrations are matched with Harriot's *Brief and true report* in the De Bry edition, even went as far as drawing tails on the bodies of some of the natives, who are labeled as the "Chief men of Virginia" (Harriot 74). Although the tails can be interpreted as a part of Native American dress, White drew them in an animate, lively way. His depiction of them reinforces the idea that the natives were indeed animals whose outward appearance reflected their inward incivility. Harriot mentions no comment on the tails. However, White's emphasis on them remains clear—he is emphasizing the animalistic qualities of the natives. Such barbaric depictions, whether they exist in word or image, create a palpable sense of colonizer disgust and disrespect for the native inhabitants. The Powhatans were either granted animalistic qualities or devilish demeanors, all of

which served to delineate a clear distinction between the civilized, morally upright colonizers from the debauched indigenes whose uncivilized ways they aimed to transform. Such a refined distinction aided the colonizers' ability to assert their rightful authority upon a people they were forced to rely on at times.

Other Englishmen who came to the colony of Jamestown, which was originally chartered in 1606, resorted to the same dehumanizing language as those before them. In fact, the Council of Virginia stated in their *A True Declaration* in 1610 (Haile 469), when justifying their invasion onto native land, that "it is not unlawful we possess part of their land and dwell with them and defend ourselves from them...partly because there is no trust to the fidelity of human beasts except a man will make a league with lions, bears, and crocodiles..." (Haile 470). In comparing their relationship with the native Powhatans to one of man and beast, the Council of Virginia is espousing the dehumanizing rhetoric that played a significant role in shaping colonial attitudes. The continual assertion that the Natives are uncivilized, bestial creatures who cannot be trusted or reckoned with is adopted by many other colonial leaders such as George Percy. Percy arrived to Virginia on the first chartered expedition to Jamestown in 1606 and later assumed leadership during the "starving times" until his departure in 1612 (Haile 52). Percy's experience in the New World was heavily documented since his arrival in 1606. The same year, in *Observations gathered out of a discourse of the plantation of the southern colony in Virginia by the English*, Percy resorted to labeling the native inhabitants as "savages" who would "[creep] upon all four from the hills like bears, with their bows in their mouths, [and charge] us very desperately in the faces" (Haile 90). As evidenced in Percy's rhetoric, the Natives are not seen as human opponents. They were, in fact, viewed as animals by the English, animals that deserved English subjugation and exploitation. Percy's attitude of superiority is also exacerbated as he chides the

aforementioned “bears” on feeling “the sharpness of [the English] shot” (Haile 90). It is evident from Percy’s writing that he is wielding power from the rhetorical denunciation of the natives as barbaric creatures. Percy continues to recount in the same discourse that the natives acted like “wolves or devils” and “[made] many devilish gestures with a hellish noise, foaming at the mouth, staring with their eyes, wagging their heads and hands in such a fashion...it was monstrous to behold” (Haile 99). In drawing parallels between monstrous creatures and the indigenous population, colonizers like Percy were able to remedy the cognitive dissonance they felt by masking their insecurity through a facade of exaggerated confidence. Such confidence, however, was gained through the English degradation of the natives they ironically relied on. As cultural historian Walter Hixson clarified earlier, the formation of the domineering colonial identity was dependent upon the subjugation of the native population.

Percy and other colonizers alike attempted to reconcile their insecurity and tension through the continual denunciation of the people they were struggling to conquer. The English were bound in an unhealthy predicament; they were struggling to fulfill the grandiose promise of finding economic prosperity in a foreign land that deprived them of exactly that. Their manner of coping psychologically was to rhetorically place themselves in a superior status, which set them apart from the “savages” they came to conquer and allowed them to justify their colonial intrusion. Human development research, Sunil Bhatia, states the European mindset consisted of ardently believing “it was rightful and fair for the lesser adapted groups (‘savages’) with simple cultures to give up their rights and freedom to the superior European groups” (382). Hence, the strategy of dehumanization served another purpose for the English psyche—It also allowed them to justify the atrocities they committed upon a people whose land they raided, burned, and stole from. The English hid behind the excuse that they were uplifting the savages, and thus, they

believed their violence was justified to achieve this end. In fact, the overall devastation inflicted upon the indigenous population can be recapped as “millions of deaths and displacements,” in which “the overwhelming majority...died, their cultures and way of life were shattered beyond recognition, and they now confronted a people in the Europeans whose technologies, economic and spiritual drives, racial formations, and ethnocentricity offered little hope of compromise” (Hixson 43). The English were able to effectively appease their moral tension, provoked by the atrocities they committed to the natives, by relegating them to a sub-human and sometimes, devilish status. Thus, dehumanization again provides a solution to remedy the cognitive dissonance felt by the English.

Dehumanization: A Tool Used to Justify Atrocity

Edward Sturman, a professor from the Department of Psychology at the State University of New York, explains dehumanization as a coping mechanism “by which humans are able to drop their inhibitions against doing harm to others and commit unspeakable acts of cruelty and horror” (Sturman 527). “These atrocities,” Sturman continues, “appear to be facilitated by the perpetrators' ability to think of the victims as subhuman” (527). Evidently, the colonizers used a strategy of rhetorical denunciation to strip away the native’s humanity so they could grapple with the psychological discomfort associated with exploiting millions of natives. In the English mind, they were only slaughtering animals—animals that stood in the way of satiating English greed. In relegating an entire population of ingenious Powhatans to a sub-human status, the English colonizers were able to assuage the moral tension they had as a result of killing a native people and raiding a foreign land. This coping strategy is further understood by Sturman’s explanation of how cognitive dissonance affects soldiers in war. Sturman reveals that killing violates a basic human moral code and that doing so creates a high level of tension for the individual (530). In

order to appease this tension, Sturman argues that individuals must shift their attitudes so they are consistent with their behavior. That is, the soldiers must change their attitude not against killing (which they must engage in) but in the way they view their subjects. This dissonance reduction technique allows them to surmise it is not murder if their subjects are not human (Sturman 530). In downplaying the human status of their targets, soldiers are able to effectively mitigate the tension they feel in killing humans. The soldiers, alike the English colonizers, are attempting to evade a moral upset created by a flagrant disrespect for human life.

Perhaps this is why the English felt the need to distance themselves from the subjects they aimed to both kill and conquer—they could not bear to commit atrocities upon a savage populace they were very similar to. As evident from their actions, the English mirrored many of the “barbaric” qualities they attributed to the native population, especially during times of colonial distress and hardship. Specifically, in the absence of government, the English were reduced to the savages they routinely condemned. The mutiny and killings that surfaced in Bermuda after the *Sea Venture* shipwreck confirms this premise. A mere wrestling match on the island, as told by English writer William Strachey, escalated to murder when “Robert Waters picked up a shovel and struck his opponent Edward Samuel in the head, instantly killing him” (Woodward 59). Water’s death sentence caused dissension within the *Sea Venture* community and it began to plant the seeds of mutiny and distrust that would eventually blossom into full scale rebellion. This early act of violence on the Bermuda Island illustrates the English propensity for aggression and brutality. Through the breakdown of English civility, the colonizers were forced to grapple with the idea that they were not as far removed from the indigenes as they thought they were. From cannibalism to a blatant disregard for native life in lootings and raids, the English committed many atrocities in the New World colonies, all of

which impeded the psychological distance they tried to create between themselves and the “savages” they condemned. Cultural historian Walter Hixson elaborates on this idea by revealing that, “the slippages and uncertainty within the colonizer’s identity, including taking on some of the characteristics of the ‘savage,’ produced anxiety and instability” (Hixson 3). Hence, further cognitive dissonance is bred out English relatability to a group of people they regarded as lesser and uncivilized. The idea that the English were a superior, morally upright force collapsed in the face of their barbaric actions, which reduced them to the “savages” they despised. In all, the clear absence of English civility troubled the English conscience as they were forced to reconcile not only a disgust with the native people, but a subconscious disgust with themselves.

The Reconciling of English Disgust

This tension and disgust within the English mind prompted the occurrence of flagrant violence and dehumanization of the native population in Virginia. As Hixson elaborates, “the complexity of the colonial encounter suggests that ambivalence and hybridity created unwanted contingencies and psychic anxieties that tended ultimately to be reconciled through violence” (Hixson 2013). The recognized similarities between the colonizer and the native population haunted the minds of those who believed they were superior to the natives. Hence, the English coping strategy was to partake in more aggression, which further exacerbated the moral tension they felt in committing arbitrary atrocity. This violence began to weigh heavily on the English conscience as they readily excused the transgressions they committed. The English, in writing about colonial exploitation of the natives and their land, appear to be blameless and justified in their written accounts. They often pardoned their offenses by employing the concept of self-defense; atrocities were only committed when the natives instigated the violence by attacking the English first. John Docker, a professor of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry from the

University of Sydney, wrote in his latest book, *The Origins of Violence*, that “[colonizers] believed in just war theory, where they would arrive peacefully in a place and only take up arms when forced to defend themselves against attacks by the colonized” (177-78). Thus, the English adopted a “just war theory” mentality that allowed them to bypass the guilt associated with committing capricious acts of violence. Abiding by this psychological theory provided them with ample justification for their killing sprees and decimation of native land. As quoted earlier in the paper by colonial promoter Robert Johnson, the English rationalized their behavior by claiming to only use violence when “the unbridled beasts...procured it to themselves” (Woodward 16-17). In spite of this justification, however, it remains clear that even in self-defense, the English could not fully appease their guilty conscience.

The Formation of a Guilty Conscience: George Percy

George Percy’s writing of *A Trewe Relacyon* illustrates the formation of the English guilty conscience as well as the inability of dehumanization to be an effective coping mechanism over time. Analyzing Percy’s intent for writing this letter is crucial to understanding how it served as a coping mechanism (a dissonance reduction technique) to which he resorted as his conscience grew heavy. Percy’s earlier remarks depicting the animalistic qualities of the natives came from his *Observations*, a discourse published in 1606 (Haile 85). This report included his thoughts on Virginia for the very first time. In his writing, Percy earnestly extolled the promises of a land he believed to be replete with bountiful resources such as a “great store of fresh fish” (Haile 88) and the “thickest of the woods” (Haile 87). However, Percy’s next account came during a time when the colony was struck with famine, disease, and unrelenting native warfare as he elaborated on the “sharp prick of hunger” and “a world of miseries” (Haile 505) that ensued during 1609-1612 years. Percy recounts the barbarous acts of cannibalism that occurred amidst a

starving populace; the colonists were quick to not only dig up dead corpses but to “[lick] up the blood which hath fallen from their weak fellows” (Haile 505). Hence, the publication of his *Trewe Relacyon* in 1625, thirteen years after he left the colony in 1612, signifies Percy’s attempt to shed light on the horrifying realities that plagued Jamestown during his time as both president and governor there. His *Trewe Relacyon* can be viewed as an extension of the story he begins to tell in *Observations*. Percy was indeed revealing an ugly truth behind the English colonial encounter, one that many writers of the time conveniently glossed over or completely misrepresented.

Percy published his letter to directly counter one such writer, John Smith, who published *The Generall Historie* in 1624, a year before Percy’s work was published by Samuel Purchas in 1625 (Hermann 8). Percy’s intent behind publishing his originally private reflections can be seen at the beginning of his letter—he immediately condemns the “many falseties and malicyous detractyons” (Haile 101) given by prior colonial leader John Smith (Hermann 8). According to historian Philip Barbour from the University of North Carolina, Percy’s letter can be viewed as a direct response to Smith’s work for two main reasons. Firstly, Percy was fixing a reputation he believed to be attacked by Smith, who questioned Percy’s health and struggling leadership. Smith labeled him as “being very sick” (Haile 329) and called into question his capacity to effectively handle colonial rule. Secondly, he was exposing the public to a grim reality which Smith could not do, given Smith’s departure before the “starving times” in 1609-10 (Barbour 13). Percy was trying to divulge an unsettling truth to the public, one that was downplayed or completely left out of most colonial accounts. His immediate response to Smith highlights his determination to unearth a guilty conscience upon a public who is unaware of English atrocity in the New World.

The most telling aspect of Percy's *Trewe Relacyon* comes from examining his intent behind writing the work itself. His work was originally intended to be excluded from the public eye—*Trewe Relacyon* was a private letter dedicated to his brother Henry, the 9th Earl of Northumberland (Hermann 53). Written thirteen years after his time spent in Virginia, Percy's letter resembles a confession in which he laments English conduct in the New World during his time spent there from 1609-12. His writing illustrates the formation of an English guilty conscience as former colonials like him had time to reflect on their conduct years later. Most writers of the time glossed over the barbarous acts that troubled their conscience. In fact, Ward Churchill, Native American historian, indicates in an introduction to his book *Fantasies of the Master Race*, that "propagandists in service to elite interests have long been bent to the task of inventing a whole vernacular behind which to mask the true nature of U.S.-Indian relations" (XI). Percy violated conventional standards by showcasing just how violent and relentless the English really were in their supposedly "honorable" colonial mission. Peter Mancall, historian and professor at the University of Southern California, highlights the litany of atrocities that Percy gave in his *Trewe Relacyon*. Perhaps the incivilities mentioned by Percy such as "attacking Powhatans' farms, houses, and shrines; murdering children for no apparent reason; hanging a man by his thumbs; [and] eating human remains," (Mancall 670) began to wear on the collective English conscience. Mark Nicholls, a historian and professor from the University of Cambridge, reveals that Percy's *Trewe Relation* is the result of moral strife, a cognitive dissonance of sorts. He states that "fifteen years after the events described, [Percy] was still haunted by a sense of bodily, and moral, failure, and by some pressing obligation to set the details, suitably glossed, on the record" (Nicholls 230). Thus, in order to appease his guilty conscience, Percy used his

writing as a coping mechanism to alleviate the moral tension he felt from engaging in prior English atrocity.

When Dehumanization Fails as a Coping Strategy

In the end, dehumanization was not sufficient enough of a coping strategy to appease the guilt and psychological turmoil felt by most colonials. Percy illustrates this perfectly as he turned to his pen and paper to confess the atrocities he felt complicit in. His brutally graphic account in *Trewe Relacyon* depicted instances in which native children were put to death by “throwing them overboard and shooting out their brains in the water” (Haile 510). Following this incident, he recounts his attempt to save the native Queen. He admits, “having seen so much bloodshed that day, now in my cold blood I desired to see no more” (Haile 510). Percy, however, ultimately failed in his effort to save the Queen’s life as he remarks, the soldiers went “into the woods and put her to the sword” (Haile 510). Because of gruesome instances like this, Percy’s conscience grew heavy over time. His reflections in *Trewe Relacyon* indicate his inability to cope with the prior atrocity he either witnessed or took part in. Nevertheless, his confession announced to the public that England was not acting as mighty or just as it had claimed to. The mission of the “honorable” colonizer, as championed by many colonial advocates, cannot be seen in these dark times. Just war theory, in which violence and atrocity are justified by self-defense, cannot excuse such arbitrary slaughter. Not even dehumanization, the most common coping mechanism for cognitive dissonance in Jamestown, can mollify the tension felt by colonizers like Percy.

Dehumanization was a drug used by the English to temporarily escape a recurring affliction. This affliction—the cognitive dissonance and subsequent guilt experienced by the colonizers—was one that never truly went away despite English efforts to dull its pain through the dehumanization coping strategy. The dehumanization of the natives they exploited and killed

did not ultimately satisfy the moral upset that awakened inside of the English. Percy's letter of confession from 1625, which is filled with remorse, is evidence of this inherent moral upset. Percy was arguably the coldest, most verbally abusive writer of native accounts. The fact that he shows remorse years later is indicative of the inescapability of human morality. The guilt that results from violating the basic principles of human decency and respect is much stronger than human willpower, which often attempts to overcome it. As evidenced by Percy, humans are bound by a common moral thread that, when severed, creates emotional turmoil or cognitive dissonance. The human attempt to escape such turmoil is lackluster at best, for one cannot escape the wrath of the human conscience.

The downplaying and evading of human atrocity is not an action that is limited to the English colonial encounter. Foreign policy today is dominated by an agenda that stresses the need to exert control over various regions in the name of "beneficence" and spreading civilization. Self-interest has been absent from imperial justification since the very first colonial encounters that predate the seventeenth century. From Greek imperialism to the Cold War imperial agenda, humans are adept at justifying colonial intrusion through alleged claims of good will. Such claims, however, weigh heavy on the human conscience as the agenda of most imperial efforts are ultimately grounded in superiority, self-interest, and a tireless thirst for power. What is claimed to be a mission to uplift others is instead a mission to increase the self-serving power of another country. Accordingly, it is important to analyze prior colonial efforts so that one can understand how prior English motives are similar to those of today. The role of self-interest in shaping national agenda is neither a new occurrence nor something that can be effectively reconciled. Psychologists Shelley Taylor and Jonathan Brown elaborate on the normalcy of illusion and heightened self-perception in human cognition. In their research, Taylor

and Brown conclude that “exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery, and unrealistic optimism are characteristics of *normal* human thought” (199). Their study elucidates the reasons why humans ardently believe they are better than they really are; it aids their ability to maximize their goals and meet their potential (Taylor and Brown 193). As explained above, humans are inclined to believe in self-enhancing perceptions of themselves. Because of this inclination, the English colonial effort should not be viewed as an immorally repugnant one. Their effort merely capitalizes on the human characteristics that produce success and motivation. These characteristics, feelings of self-interest and mastery, have carried across time and currently shape today’s foreign policy. According to Taylor and Brown, self-interest is and always has been essential to the human pursuit to achieve greatness.

The English mission, although lofty in its goals, led to widespread disillusionment in Jamestown. The colonials had grossly unrealistic expectations of what lay across the Atlantic Ocean. When they failed to meet their goals—attaining vast amounts of wealth, conquering the foreign land, and easily taming its “debauched” people—they were wrought with psychological torment. Dehumanization was the common strategy used by the English to remedy this torment and mask their subsequent dependency on the natives. The colonials were attempting to preserve the feelings of superiority that drove them to the Americas by belittling those they were forced to rely on. Dehumanization also provided them with a way to temporarily escape the dissonance they felt in regards to native slaughter and maltreatment. However, this strategy failed to ultimately provide the Englishmen with a *permanent* coping mechanism with which they could escape their troubled conscience. Although their derogatory remarks were useful in allowing them to regain control over a situation they felt hopelessly lost in, they were not able to effectively remedy the dissonance they felt in invading, raping, and conquering a land filled with

millions of native people. George Percy's letter is evidence of just this—the inescapability of the human conscience. When the most verbally abusive colonial leader could not be appeased with the coping mechanism he had used for so long—dehumanization—he resorted to writing a confession that ultimately showcased his guilty conscience to the public. Percy reminds us that Englishman's greatest burden was, in the end, a product of his own mind.

Sources

- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol. 28, 1984, pp. 125–133. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/778467.
- Bhatia, Sunil. "Orientalism in Euro-American and Indian psychology: Historical representations of 'natives' in colonial and postcolonial contexts." *History Of Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2002, pp. 376-98, doi:10.1037/1093-4510.5.4.376. Accessed 18 Mar. 2018.
- Brewster, William. "Letter from Virginia." In *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, edited by Edward W. Haile, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 127.
- Bulhan, Hussein A. *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*. New York, Plenum Press, 1985, pp. 64-66.
- Churchill, Ward. *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, cinema, and the colonization of American Indians*. San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1998. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=W3TN0TXq8pYC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=psychology+justifying+colonization+native+americans&ots=RbUi4viOG-&sig=8Ym8tEd39kRS66GBes8R4J5hBkM#v=onepage&q=psychology%20justifying%20colonization%20native%20americans&f=false>
- Docker, John. *The Origins of Violence: Religion, History, and Genocide*. London, Pluto Press, 2008.
- Haile, Edward W. *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony: The first decade, 1607-1617*. RoundHouse, 1998.
- Hamel, Lauren M. "Cognitive Dissonance." *Encyclopedia of Deception*. Ed. Timothy R. Levine. Vol. 1. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014. 154-156. *SAGE Knowledge*. Web, doi: 10.4135/9781483306902.n62

Harriot, Thomas, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Ed. Theodore De Bry.

Frankfurt, 1590. Facsim. Ed Paul Hulton. New York: Dover Publications, 1972. Print.

Hixson, Walter L. *American Settler Colonialism*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Johnson, Robert. "Nova Britannia: Offering most excellent fruits by planting in Virginia." vol. 1

American Colonial Tracts Monthly, edited by George P. Humphrey, London, Foreign Agents
Gay and Bird, 1897, 6 vols, pp. 1-28,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=DcdJAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA12&lpg=RA1->

[PA12&dq=As+for+supplanting+the+savages,+we+have+no+such+intent...Our+intrusion+into+their+possession+shall+tend+to+their+great+good+and](https://books.google.com/books?id=DcdJAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA12&lpg=RA1-PA12&dq=As+for+supplanting+the+savages,+we+have+no+such+intent...Our+intrusion+into+their+possession+shall+tend+to+their+great+good+and)

Jonson, Ben. *Eastward Ho!*. Dumfries and Galloway, Anodos Books, 2017.

Kupperman, Karen. *The Jamestown Project*. Virginia, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

Mancall, Peter C. "Savagery in Jamestown." *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2007, pp. 661–670. *JSTOR*, , www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2007.70.4.661

Percy, George. "Observations gathered out of a discourse of the plantation of the southern colony in Virginia by the English, 1606." In *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, edited by Edward W. Haile, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 85-100.

---. "A True Relation." *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, edited by Edward W. Haile, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 497-519.

Rich, Richard. "News from Virginia." *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, edited by Edward W. Haile, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 372-79.

- Smith, John. "The General History: The Third Book--The proceedings and accidents of the English colony in Virginia." In *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, edited by Edward W. Haile, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 215-349.
- Sokol, B.J. "The Problem of Assessing Thomas Harriot's a Briefe and True Report of His Discoveries in North America." *Annals of Science*, vol. 51, no. 1, Jan. 1994, p. 1. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hia&AN=6117023&site=ehost-live
- Strachey, William. "A True Reportory." *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, edited by Edward W. Haile, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 419.
- Sturman, Edward D. "Dehumanizing Just Makes You Feel Better: The Role of Cognitive Dissonance in Dehumanization." *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 4, Dec. 2012, pp. 527-531. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1037/h0099231.
- Taylor, Shelley E., and Jonathon D. Brown. "Illusion and Well-being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health." *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 103, no. 2, 1988, pp. 193-210.
- The Council of Virginia. "A True Declaration of the estate of the colony in Virginia, with a confutation of such scandalous reports as have tended to the disgrace of so unworthy as enterprise." *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony*, The Council of Virginia, Champlain, Roundhouse, 1998, pp. 468-77.
- Woodward, Hobson. *The True Tale of the Castaways who Rescued Jamestown: A Brave Vessel*. New York, Penguin Books, 2010.