

Nationalism[s]: Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions*. By Xaq Frohlich.

1) In the introduction, Greenblatt describes the resurfacing descriptive “marvelous” as a central rhetorical tool of appropriation in the travel literature of Europeans passing through the New World. Greenblatt, however, gives the reader warning early in the book by stating outright that “[t]he authors of the anecdotes with which this book concerns itself were liars,” and furthermore, unsystematic liars. Thus, ironically, the marvelous is employed in the travel literature to lend credit to the veracity of the accounts. For example, Mandavile’s outrageous accounts of the East are believed by his contemporaries (here I will be complicit in the practice of personifying Mandevile, who may, in fact, be a fictional author) because their exoticness is too outrageous to be taken for false. This logic is embodied in the idiom “I couldn’t have made this story up.” I was struck by the parallels between the function of the marvelous in conquistador travel literature, and the way that news works even today – the word “news” itself drew this connection for me. News is reported because it is newsworthy, and many times a story will be told because it is almost too crazy to be believed. I wonder if a similar argument could be made about how historians build their stories. For example, are the accounts that Greenblatt uses the “norm” for the experiences of Europeans in the New World, or are they somehow unique, which then provide him and his readers the opportunity to learn something new? In other words, does “the marvelous” continue to function today in a similar manner to what Greenblatt describes for the early European explorer?

2) The mimetic practices throughout the book are the other central theme that Greenblatt explores. In each encounter between Europeans and natives, Greenblatt shows how exchange is the Europeans’ manner of building bridges over the otherwise (and possibly still) insurmountable language barrier. The Europeans’ continual recourse to trade as an effective means of cultural assimilation, Greenblatt argues, is rather a sign of their cocky appropriative strategies. In this manner, “marvelous possessions” carries a double (and loaded) meaning, because the Europeans repeatedly feel as they are fleecing the natives in their exchanges – pearls and gold are traded for “common day items” given to the natives. Greenblatt, I think brilliantly, demonstrates the near emptiness of mimesis as an immediate cultural bridge for assimilation, as both parties are subject to differing interpretations of what the mimetic acts signify. The sad outcome of this for the natives is that the Europeans’ gift exchange becomes an extension of their conquering narrative. Similarly, the European travel narratives gloss over what must have been extraordinarily confusing scenes of discourse, when interpreting hand signs and body motions (for lack of a common language) often seem to be the two parties speaking past each other.