We try to establish what the author meant, and not at all what the reader understands.

—Roland Barthes

It is late 2022, and I am standing in one of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA)’s recently reinstalled galleries of early American art (fig. 1). A case directly before me displays the famous Penn Treaty Belt (fig. 2), a splendid stretch of woven wampum that depicts two figures against a field of white consisting of hundreds of precisely worked fragments of whelk shells. Traditionally, the belt is associated with the celebrated 1682 meeting between the Indigenous Lenape, or Delaware, Indians, and William Penn, the proprietor of Pennsylvania, beneath an elm at Shackamaxon near Philadelphia. In fact, however, there is no conclusive proof that such a meeting ever took place, and there is much, too, that we do not know about the belt; its maker, date of manufacture, and early provenance all remain unclear. All this uncertainty helps explain the tentative language of the museum placard that accompanies the belt. "Perhaps," it reads, "the maker of the belt intended the linked hands of the two figures—the taller Lenape and the smaller European—to commemorate a moment of peaceful coexistence.”
Perhaps. But is an attempt to excavate the intention of a spectral hypothetical maker really the sole means of understanding the belt? Or, given the belt’s apparent status as an intercultural ambassador and its many subsequent interpreters, might the observations of reception theorists be of value? In other words, might we follow the Lenape in recognizing that a wampum belt can be read but acknowledge, too, that reading is inevitably an active process of interaction between a medium and various audiences, yielding interpretations that may or may not coincide with its maker’s intentions? As an art historian long interested in the interpretive role played by various beholders over time, I think that we might—and, given that the recent efflorescence of scholarly interest in wampum has largely conceived of artistic meaning in a static sense, I think that we should. Here, then, I will try to sketch what an analysis informed by reception theory might suggest about the Penn Treaty Belt.

Notably, contemporary commentators generally agree with the placard’s hypothesis that the belt’s central message is one of concord and peace. To the Mohawk storyteller Tehanetorens, the belt suggests two peoples “joined together as one.” And to the historian Alison Duncan Hirsch, “It portrays two men holding hands—one English, one Lenape—to symbolize peace.” In short, the belt is broadly seen as embodying the spirit of rhetorical goodwill that initially characterized relations between Native Peoples and Pennsylvanians in the early 1680s.

Such a reading, moreover, is defensible in several senses. Wampum belts could serve a wide range of functions, but they were frequently presented as material records of alliances and as political gifts among allies (fig. 3). More specifically, in Lenape, Haudenosaunee, and Algonquian diplomatic culture, the joining of hands generally signified friendship and solidarity. Traditional accounts of the binding of the Haudenosaunee peoples positioned the holding of hands as an inaugural act in a tradition of peace, and Eastern Woodland Native Americans regularly joined hands as a means of expressing friendship or cohabitation. Furthermore, Penn had explicitly accented the themes of love and friendship in a 1681 letter to Native leaders, and in an English context,
joined hands also often communicated notions of covenant and peaceful love. In a 1644 overview of gestures, for example, John Bulwer characterizes the shaking of hands as “an expression usuall in friendship, peacefull love, benevolence, salutation, entertainment, and bidding welcome.” Given concurrent European interest in the allegedly natural and universally communicative aspects of gestures, it was clearly tempting—and evidently remains tempting—to see the primary theme of the Penn Treaty Belt as plainly legible to both Lenape viewers and colonial Pennsylvanians.

Nevertheless, there are certain difficulties with such a position. Most troubling, perhaps, is the fact that there is real disagreement about the identity of the two figures. While some have read the taller figure as a Lenape chieftain in a feathered headdress and the smaller figure as an Englishman, others have viewed the larger figure as Penn in a broad-brimmed Quaker hat and the second figure as Tamanend, a Lenape leader. Similarly, divergent interpretations have been advanced regarding the white field of beads, with some scholars maintaining that it signified a hoped-for peace or a harmonious environment and others seeing it as a reference to the white page on which treaties were typically recorded. The prominent diagonal bands have variously been read as evocations of allies, references to the territories that were the subject of negotiation, or testaments to the sincerity of the represented figures.

In such an unstable iconographic environment, the significance of the gesture of the two figures at the center of the belt also begins to wobble. Are the two figures joining hands or shaking hands—or might one be taking the other’s hand or even leading by the hand?

Admittedly, such questions can seem pedantic. After all, Native diplomats were apparently alert to the potentially open-ended quality of wampum belt imagery, which is presumably why they sometimes explained the intended meanings to their diplomatic counterparts, obviating potential confusion. Some Native communities also held collective readings of wampum belts in an attempt to ensure the transgenerational stability of the belts’ meanings. Even so, alternative readings could and did arise, since Native ambassadors were only one link in a chain of cross-cultural communication, and the meanings that they assigned the belts did not always correspond to those perceived by the belts’ makers or eventual recipients. Thus, Hirsch suggests that female makers of wampum belts may have thought of the figures as generically human rather than necessarily male. In turn, Euro-American observers viewed the belts through culturally specific conceptual filters that influenced their responses to specific gestures, colors, and even forms. And later observers have added still other readings.

In other words, the Penn Treaty Belt has long inspired the varied constitutive responses that Wolfgang Iser once saw as typical of indeterminate texts. Critically, though, the belt’s indeterminacy was also productive in that it supported different readings that managed to satisfy the divergent expectations of the two primary parties—and thus echoed a relevant Native interest in parallelisms and mutuality. In this way, the belt’s polyvalence also obscured substantial differences between Native and Euro-American priorities. With time, though, those differences became increasingly clear, and any sense of innocent amity expressed in the Penn Treaty Belt eventually yielded to more contentious and even openly violent interactions.

The head of the larger figure offers a useful starting point in a close consideration of the belt’s iconography. Comprised of ten beads, this head is more than twice as large as the
counterpart’s—suggesting the possibility of some sort of headgear. That, at least, was the conclusion of two Haudenosaunee chiefs in the early 1900s, who assumed that the figure is wearing a feathered headdress.21 The idea is certainly historically plausible: in 1654, Peter Lindeström reported that the Lenape painted their faces with many colors and decorated their heads with “long and large painted bird feathers.”22 More specifically, Lenape and Haudenosaunee males often wore a gustoweh, a framework of splints that could carry a cluster of feather webbing, which was sometimes capped by large feathers, shaft ornaments, and plummed spikes to create a sizable, dramatic headdress.23 Furthermore, both of the figures are formed of purplish beads made from the mantles of clam valves in an involved series of steps; typically, they cost roughly twice as much as the more easily manufactured white beads.24 To be sure, purple beads carried various connotations, but their relatively generous usage in the case of the larger figure suggests importance or power to many observers.25 Indeed, the two Haudenosaunee chiefs stated that the figure was enlarged precisely because Indigenous Peoples were at that time stronger than the newly arrived, precariously positioned colonists.26

So far, so good. But the same form was almost certainly viewed differently by Penn and his Quaker cohort—some of whom, importantly, had faced intense public condemnation for their unusual attitudes toward headgear. As Andrew Murphy observes, hat–honor (the polite removal of one’s hat) was a stock gesture of respect in seventeenth-century England.27 The Quaker founder George Fox, however, openly criticized hat–honor as vain and hypocritical.28 His followers embraced that idea, and Penn actually incurred a fine for refusing to doff his broad-brimmed hat during a 1670 trial:

Recorder: Why do you not put off your hat then?

Penn: Because I do not believe that to be any respect.29

The Quakers’ rejection of hat–honor (and of the social hierarchy that it upheld) was a subject of repeated debate and ridicule in the later 1600s.30 Given such a context, some early Euro-American viewers likely saw the larger figure in the belt as wearing a hat rather than a feathered headdress. That, at least, was the impression of Penn’s great-grandson, who stated (when donating the belt to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1857) that the larger figure was indeed a European in a hat.31 The larger of the two figures could thus easily support two different interpretations, allowing each of the primary diplomatic parties a degree of meaningful identification. Or, to use phrasings drawn from reception theory, the belt’s imagery could be read differently by the two interpretive communities, whose cultural horizons of expectation were quite distinct.32

Similarly, the hands of the two figures also facilitated multiple interpretations, in part because they are rendered cursorily, by a single bead apiece. The figures’ engaged arms are a bead shorter than their relaxed limbs, arguably supporting the idea that their hands are intertwined. As mentioned above, joined hands could connote, in both Native American and English visual cultures, friendship or solidarity. Notably, too, gesture was sometimes posited as a means of clear communication that helped parties overcome linguistic challenges. In fact, Bulwer celebrates the value of gesture in speaking with Native Americans:

The Hand alone doth intimate our strong
Or faint desires: In this garbe long ago
We spake with th’Indian Apochankano.³³

But such optimism in the universal comprehensibility of gesture was undercut by the existence of several closely related but semantically distinct gestures. Indeed, Bulwer admits that the touching of hands could also signify a covenant or a legal contract.³⁴ And, in fact, both Penn and the Lenape were familiar with this sense. In 1683, Penn wrote of his role in a council meeting regarding land purchases; at one point, a Native deputy “came to me, and in the name of his king saluted me, then took me by the hand, and told me that he was ordered by his king to speak to me.”³⁵ A close discussion of boundaries and prices followed.

And that is not all, for the idea of leading another by the hand was also central to Penn’s notions of colonization and religious salvation. In several of his early religious treatises, Penn had referred to such a gesture; in No Cross, No Crown, for instance, Penn writes that when he was younger, God “took me by the hand, and led me out of the pleasures, vanities, and hopes of the world.”³⁶ The reference meaningfully recalls similar moments in seventeenth-century religious imagery that also associate the taking of another’s hand with religious guidance (fig. 4).

But the gesture was not only a divine one. In August of 1682, as he set sail for Pennsylvania, Penn encouraged his children to “pity the distressed, and hold out a hand of help to them.”³⁷ Penn may have had the poor, generally—in mind—but it is also worth noting that the 1681 Charter of Pennsylvania explicitly commended Penn for his desire to “reduce [that is, lead] the savage natives, by gentle and just manners, to the love of civil society and Christian religion.”³⁸ The gesture in the wampum belt, then, could be seen as one of amity, of ratification, or of Christian paternalism.

The same can arguably also be said of the largely uninterrupted white field that surrounds the figures. To Lenape and Haudenosaunee viewers, white beads often (if not inevitably) connoted ease or harmony, and the belt’s maker may well have intended to invoke such qualities.³⁹ To Christian colonists, however, the undecorated expanses of the belt may have recalled the Biblical injunction to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28): an important foundation in the European sanctioning of the “occupation of lands thought to be either underpopulated or underutilized.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the undecorated expanses of the belt also

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echo visual passages in several contemporary European examples that stressed the unpopulated potential of America. A 1681 English map of portions of Pennsylvania (fig. 5), for example, presents the territory as largely empty and implicitly unpopulated, a theme that is extended in the accompanying text that states: “It seems to many, to be the time wherein those desolate Western parts of the World are to be Planted.” As Emily Mann has recently observed, text and image work together in the map to subdue and silence Indigenous presence and to present the land as an empty field, full of the potential for European activity and improvement. Far from suggesting harmony, such an image implies frictionless domination.

Fig. 5. Facsimile of John Thornton, A map of some of the south and east bounds of Pennsylvania in America, being partly inhabited. 1681 (published by Albert Cook Myers in 1923). Engraving, 16 1/8 x 19 5/8 in. Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library

In several ways, then, the belt could support dramatically different visions of the relationship between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. Significantly, though, this was not necessarily unintentional—for, in fact, wampum belts are two-sided objects, which could read differently to audiences viewing the belts from different angles. Occasionally, too, they were turned at critical moments. That could affect, in turn, the perceived image; for example, the powerful diagonal forms in the Penn Treaty Belt would now face in the opposite direction, creating a different visual effect. Likewise, other wampum belts sometimes depict two parallel lines or paths, as if to underscore the idea that Indigenous Peoples and colonizers experienced the world in related but ultimately distinct ways. Rather than insisting on a single meaning, in other words, Native discourse sometimes accommodated multiple views and the possibility of separate experiences. So, too, did the Penn belt.

In the early 1680s, the Lenape were a small, vulnerable group that tended to negotiate for peace and protection; Penn, in turn, headed a modest band of colonists and was both eager to avoid the violence that had recently plagued other colonies and hopeful that he
could efficiently clear titles to land that he hoped to sell.\textsuperscript{45} Both parties thus had powerful incentives to get along. Early partial congruences—the seeming mutual intelligibility of gestures and an apparent shared tendency to participate in gift culture—helped.\textsuperscript{46} But they may also, as Céline Carayon observes, have led to overconfidence and an obscuring of substantial differences between the cultures.\textsuperscript{47} In the ensuing years, the profound gulf between European and Indigenous notions of society, property ownership, and usufruct became impossible to ignore—as well as, often, to negotiate.\textsuperscript{48} Statements of goodwill and mutual friendship began to give way to distrust and even fraud, and Penn’s Woods devolved into what James Merrell once memorably called an abattoir.\textsuperscript{49}

The Penn Treaty Belt thus stands as an apparent testament to a period of fragile hope and noble mutual intentions. But its iconography was not necessarily as stable or as simple as commentators have tended to imply. Rather, the belt offers a prominent example of a polyvalent object whose place in a consequential cross-cultural conversation allowed it to support a range of connotations—which, in turn, tacitly reinforced the assumptions and aims of diverse parties.\textsuperscript{50} Perhaps the maker of the belt did indeed, as the PMA would have it, intend the linked hands of the two figures to commemorate a moment of peaceful coexistence. But the intention of the author, as Roland Barthes knew, does not necessarily correspond to the responses of the readers. Once we accept the basic indeterminacy of the belt, we can begin to reconstruct some of those responses while also seeing our own interpretations as part of a dynamic and ongoing interpretive process, through which diverse meanings are (and always have been) actively created.

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\textbf{Notes}


2 For a candid assessment of the uncertainty surrounding the belt (which is also sometimes called the Great Treaty Wampum Belt) and the difficulties facing any would-be interpreter, see Marshall Joseph Becker, “Lenape Land Sales, Treaties, and Wampum Belts,” \textit{Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography} 108, no. 3 (July 1984): 355–56.


8 Most scholars assume that the belt dates to the 1680s. For a rare contrary view that dates the belt to the years after 1750, see Marshall J. Becker, “A Wampum Belt Chronology: Origins to Modern Times,” *Northeast Anthropology* 63 (Spring 2002): 59.


17 For a sensitive consideration of the broader figurative implications of collective readings of wampum within Native communities, see Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, esp. 101–2.


Court proceedings, quoted in Murphy, *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration*, 70. The transcript of the trial was originally published in *The Peoples Ancient and Just Liberties Asserted . . .* (London, c. 1670).

In a 1660 tract, for instance, Thomas Underhill wrote mockingly of the Quaker stance that "bowing the body, and putting off the Hat unto one another, is an Heathenish Custome, and Idolatry"; *Hell Broke Loose: Or an History of the Quakers* (London: Simon Miller, 1660), 18. Emphasis original.

Beauchamp, "Wampum and Shell Articles Used by the New York Indians," 394.

For the initial uses of these influential concepts, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).


Bulwer, *Chirologia*, 101. He calls this gesture reconcilium and describes it as "when we GIVE OUR HAND, we doe seal as it were an obligation or real contract."


Also relevant is *The Christian–Quaker, and His Divine Testimony Vindicated* (London, 1674), 65.


A Map of Some of the South and east bounds of Pennsylvania in America, being partly Inhabited (London: John Thornton, 1681).


Relatedly, there is now a valuable body of scholarship on the complex intercultural aspects of treaty negotiation in the Delaware Valley in the late 1600s. For a summary of that literature and an influential analysis of the role of cross-cultural adjudication in the development of Pennsylvanian treaties, see Vicki Hsueh, *Hybrid Constitutions: Challenging Legacies of Law, Privilege, and Culture in Colonial America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 84–85, 110.