



Renaissance Primitivism: Old Worlds, New Worlds, and the Origins of Culture in Early Modern England

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Signature 

Typed name: Prof. Stephen Greenblatt

Signature 

Typed name: Prof. Marjorie Garber

Signature 

Typed name: Prof. Leah Whittington

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof.

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof.

Date:

Renaissance Primitivism:

Old Worlds, New Worlds, and the Origins of Culture in Early Modern England

A dissertation presented

by

William Porter

to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Renaissance Primitivism:

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Abstract

No traffic, no magistrates, no occupation, no property: when Shakespeare lifted a passage from Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" for Gonzalo's ideal commonwealth in *The Tempest*, he was tapping into one of the richest veins opened up during the Renaissance as Europe came into contact with the New World. This dissertation argues that a new conception of "the primitive" as the crux between "nature" and "culture" was at the heart of the Renaissance, and thus played a central role in the epoch-making transformations of the early modern Atlantic World. Primitivism, a fixation with ways of life imagined to be in close proximity to nature, took on a particular and powerful form as New World ethnography was joined to the humanist preoccupation with the alien cultures of antiquity. Its consequences are explored in chapters on the humanist obsession with primitive antiquity in the Italian Renaissance; Thomas More's New World-inspired ethnographic representation of culture in *Utopia*; Walter Raleigh's true ethnography and reflection on the economic upheavals of the sixteenth-century Atlantic in *The Discovery of Guiana*; and the "myth of the white gods" as it appears throughout sixteenth-century ethnography, from both Indigenous and European perspectives, prompting in Shakespeare and Montaigne a profoundly skeptical, relativist account of human culture that springs from the misapprehensions of New World encounters.

As these authors participate in the ethnographic literature that arose from European contact with the New World, their works offer ways of illuminating the early modern entanglement of cultures. Read in concert with the wider archive of New World histories, from a Lenape oral history of the arrival of Hudson in Manhattan to Indigenous and European accounts of the fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires, these texts embed aspects of cultural encounter vital to understanding not only European fantasies but also the perspectives and realities of the Lenape, Mexica, Inca, Guianans, Algonquians, and Tupinambá who helped to create those histories. In engaging more thoroughly with Indigenous history and anthropology than is typically done in early modern literary studies, I attempt to bring an understanding of an entangled Atlantic World and the mutually-constituted cultures it produced to bear on some texts near the center of the wider transformations of the age.

Throughout these chapters I explore two major developments that grow from the convergence of humanism and New World ethnography: first, the emergence of a certain capacious understanding of human culture, what would later become the culture concept of twentieth-century anthropology, and with it the destabilizing and far-reaching possibilities of cultural relativism; second, the conceptual apparatus of colonial capitalism, the economic regime that emerged haphazardly in the first centuries of the Atlantic World. It was imaginative literature, the sphere of writing most committed to the representation of culture as the totality of life by which humans create meaning, that most fully captured the challenges and possibilities posed by this idea of a crux between nature and culture. This understanding, for More, Raleigh, Montaigne, and Shakespeare, reveals how the variable culture of traffic, titles, property, occupation, and the rest entrenches a certain view of things that is no more anchored in reality, and in all likelihood less so, than a view from somewhere else.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	vi
List of Figures	viii
Introduction: States of Nature	1
The Atavistic Renaissance: Italian Humanism's Other Antiquities	52
The New Island of Utopia	106
"A Guiana idol of Gold": Raleigh in America	175
Shakespeare's White Gods	225
Bibliography	297

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List of Figures

1. Fra Giocondo, Engraving from *M. Vitruvius per iocundum solito castigatior factus cum figuris*, Venice: Iohannes Tacuinus, 1511.
2. Cesare Cesariano, *Designs After Vitruvius*, 1521, Harvard Fine Arts Library, Cambridge, MA.
3. Cesare Cesariano, Engraving from Vitruvius Pollio, *De architectura libri dece*, trans. Cesare Cesariano, Como: G. da Pöte, 1521, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
4. Piero di Cosimo, *The Forest Fire*, c.1505, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.
5. Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*, c.1475, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
6. Filippino Lippi, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1496, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
7. Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1481, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
8. Leonardo da Vinci, *Sala delle Asse*, c.1498, Castello Sforzesco, Milan.
9. Albrecht Dürer, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1504, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
10. Andrea Mantegna, c.1463–4. *Adoration of the Magi*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
11. Engraving from Christopher Columbus, *De insulis inuentis*, Swiss School, Basel, 1493.
12. Engraving from Thomas More, *Libellus Vere Aureus Nec Minus Salutaris quam Festivus [Utopia]*, Louvain: Arte Theodorici Martini, 1516, British Library, London.
13. Theodore de Bry, Engraving, c.1592, in Johann Ludwig Gottfriedt, *Neue Welt vnd americanische Historien*, Frankfurt: Bey denen Merianischen Erben, 1655.
14. Theodoor Galle, after Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus, *Allegory of America, from New Inventions of Modern Times (Nova Reperta)*, c. 1600, Metropolitan Museum, New York.
15. Theodore de Bry, Engraving from *Grands et Petits Voyages*, Frankfurt, 1617.

Introduction: States of Nature

There is a story that exists near the heart of the Renaissance. Though it does not have a pure form, it goes something like this:

In the deep recesses of the past, humans lived much like animals, scattered in the forests and fields. They were driven by instinct. Their natural needs and desires were simple: they wanted security from the elements, from hunger, from the violence of predatory animals and, sometimes, other humans. Life under such conditions was hard, but it was also surprisingly easy. Nature provided everything that was needed. People fed on the fruits and acorns that grew in abundance, satisfying their wants with little exertion. They found shelter from the elements in caves, or imitated swallows nests to build huts. They knew no laws, no social hierarchy, no rulers, no marriage, no money, no private property. The trappings of civilization were non-existent.

Then, by accident and by their special capacity for reason, humans banded together for their own advantage. They learned to defend themselves against animals. They harnessed fire, learned the arts of language, fashioned clothes and dwellings, and raised up strong and eloquent leaders. They discovered agriculture, marked off land as private property, built towns and cities. Through their arts of rhetoric, technology, violence, and other forms of culture, humans removed themselves from this original condition and from nature. This culture brought humans great advantages—the benefits of learning, wealth, technological power, civility—but also introduced new corruptions. Property and wealth created inequalities between people, appetites increased far beyond necessity, violence and exploitation proliferated, nature’s bounty was hoarded by a few and became scarce for the many. Their life in nature was left behind.¹

Human culture emerges from a state of nature. If this is a familiar story, it is because it resembles what we have come to believe is the truth. Our origins are to be found in humanity’s long, obscure, evolutionary existence in which there was little to separate us from the non-human world. Modern life has uprooted us from that natural condition, and the character of our lives is best explained by this complex situation, at once part of and apart from nature.

¹ This is a composite account, often repeated in different versions. Its sources are examined in Chapter 1, while a variety of early modern expressions appear throughout the study.

Told this way, however, our true story takes on an elusive cast. It comes to seem a work of imagination, an invention of a particular culture, a story not unlike the wide variety of origin stories told in many different times and places. Like other origin stories, it serves certain existential purposes: linking oneself to a chain of ancestors, imagining an anchor in an irremediably murky past, situating the surrounding world and the people in it within a natural order that holds a potent explanatory power. This favorite—if not original—story of the Renaissance contains some features of outsized significance, especially in retrospect. It is speculative yet plausibly historical; it is quasi-secular; it is set in a recognizably natural world of animals, plants, and landscape; it is focused on cultural practices invented by humans that are implied to be artificial and contingent; and it is based around teleological change over time—a story ending in us. We might trace the story’s aspects in many of the major developments that achieved liftoff in Europe during these centuries, from the invention of modern natural science to the rise of the nation state, from the inception of political theory to secularization. My primary interest here is how the story instills the concept of “the primitive,” the point at which nature and culture meet, with a meaning that has shaped the whole face of the world.

That is no exaggeration. While this story and these ideas about “nature,” “culture,” and “the primitive” are by no means unique to the Renaissance, their particular significance and peculiar force come from their central role in the epoch-making transformations of the early modern Atlantic World. I will call this complex of ideas and interests “primitivism,” which I take to be a fixation with ways of life imagined to be in close proximity to nature—an understanding of things that gives significant weight to the story with which we began. “Primitivism” and “the primitive” have come to occupy fraught conceptual territory, and rightly so. The histories whose course has been shaped by these ideas are anguished histories. Moreover, the pairing of

“Renaissance Primitivism” may stand for a basic problem that has been vexing the humanities for a generation, and seems especially potent now. That is, what is celebrated by the term “Renaissance”—what is celebrated whenever we look to its art to move and enlighten us—is implicated in Europe’s eventual domination of the non-European world and its designation of its others as “primitive.” Not only is the idea of the primitive given a lasting, powerful form during this period, but the assumptions about artistic achievement, civilization, and what it means to be human that underlie the study of literature and art are part of the process by which the catastrophic effects of colonialism were brought about. The conjunction poses a challenge. As former divisions between the rarefied sphere of art and the wider socio-political world have eroded, it has become clear that the cultural heritage in which the Renaissance represents a keystone is linked uncomfortably to its fashioning in opposition to “the primitive” as well as its historical relations to the people so imagined. But it is precisely because of its momentous role that the idea of “the primitive” as it intersects with “the Renaissance” remains a vital area of inquiry: vital for understanding the global early modern world from which such histories arise, vital for understanding how it continues to shape our own perceptions of the world and the people in it.

The specific, intense forms primitivism took in European culture between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries are at the heart of the great ruptures of the age: the cultural encounters between Europe and the New World, the historical encounter with Antiquity, and the imaginative constructions of modernity. Scholarship in the humanities over the past few decades has made possible a view of these developments that is more polyvocal, heterogeneous, and connected than was once the case. Cultures never exist in isolation; they are formed uncertainly, in hybrid situations from convergent forces. In engaging more thoroughly with Indigenous history and

anthropology than is typically done in early modern literary studies, I have attempted to bring an understanding of an entangled Atlantic World and the mutually-constituted cultures it produced to bear on some texts near the center of these transformations. This dissertation is thus an attempt to face up to the challenge posed by the link between the Renaissance and primitivism, finding in the relativist conception of culture that arose from literary reflection on other cultures an invaluable way to approach complex human histories from within limited perspectives. In doing so it also attempts to answer an old question, made recently urgent: what does the New World have to do with the Renaissance? (And vice versa?)

An adequate answer, however, threatens to be about almost everything. I will focus, therefore, on two developments that seem to me to be of outsized importance. The first development, and the primary focus of this study, is the emergence of a certain capacious understanding of human culture, what would later become the “culture concept” of twentieth-century anthropology, and with it the destabilizing and far-reaching possibilities of cultural relativism.² The crucial move occurs when ethnographic accounts of Indigenous people of the New World are grafted onto the humanists’ historical obsession with antiquity. Italian humanists such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Polydore Vergil, using methods of analysis that would come to form the study of the humanities, articulated a new historical framework that emphasized the contingency of human societies in time and space, based in large measure on a primitivist account of the earliest human societies. Their inquiries into Greco-Roman and other antiquities

² “Cultural relativism,” as I will use the term, is explained by Marshall Sahlins as “the simple prescription that, in order to be intelligible, other people’s practices and ideals must be placed in their own historical context, understood as positional values in the field of their own cultural relationships rather than appreciated by categorical and moral judgments of our making. Relativity is the provisional suspension of one’s own judgments in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural order that made them possible.” Qtd. in Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, *On Kings* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2017), 214.

involved encounters with recognizably different cultures, and required a thorough reconstruction of ways of life from which modern Europeans were separated by a large gulf. In artistic representations of historical rupture such as *Adoration* paintings, in treatises on politics, rhetoric, education, and poetry, Renaissance humanists and artists sought to reveal the bones beneath the skin of their modernity.

Meanwhile, ethnographic accounts of the customs, manners, and religions of New World peoples began to circulate, joining inquiry into other ways of life with an intense interest in humanity's primitive past. It was imaginative literature, the sphere of writing most committed to the representation of culture as the totality of life by which humans create meaning, that most fully captured the challenges and possibilities posed by this view. Thus Thomas More's *Utopia* and William Shakespeare's *Tempest* join together aspects of contemporary literary practice—the drama of humanist dialogue, for instance, or the theatrical requirement that imagination be joined to direct observation—with the ethnographic form their works take. Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* shows the close proximity between the literary representation of human society and the real experience of cross-cultural exchange as he marshals a surprisingly thorough ethnographic understanding of the native Guianans he encounters into a mythic drama beyond his own experience. The resulting text, like More's and Shakespeare's, produces uncommon insight into the global significance of the New World through this picture of economic upheaval and sensitivity to its effects on Indigenous people. As More, Raleigh, Shakespeare, and Montaigne participate in the ethnographic literature that arose from European contact with the New World, their texts offer ways of illuminating the early modern entanglement of cultures. Read in concert with the wider archive of New World histories, these texts embed aspects of cultural encounter vital to understanding not only European perceptions but also the too-often

obscured perspectives of the Lenape, Mexica, Inca, Guianans, Algonquians, and Tupinambá who helped to create those histories. Literature's penchant for unsettling settled assumptions, for peering into the human world in its dazzling variety, had no small part in the cultivation of certain core values and habits of thought that have become indispensable in the modern world, including pluralism, secularism, tolerance, and, most significantly to this study, cultural relativism.

The second major development examined in these chapters is the conceptual apparatus of colonial capitalism, the economic regime that emerged haphazardly in the first centuries of the Atlantic World. As Europeans developed new capacities to seize and exploit territories abroad, new ways to create and exercise wealth, they inscribed the features of this particular economic culture into the fabric of nature. They frequently understood and articulated the immense upheavals of nascent capitalism, especially in connection to New World colonization, in primitivist terms. Thus fantasies of New World wealth, domination, and Christian conversion are expressed according to versions of the rise of human civilization. Thus the dispossession of Indian land is naturalized by John Locke's original economic order, derived from the creation of property and money in the state of nature. The economic sphere impresses itself on several texts, from *Utopia* to *The Discovery of Guiana* to *The Tempest* to Montaigne's *Essais*, intruding in a way that may suggest it be read as "reality" or "nature" in contrast to the literary "imagination" or "culture." In each case the dynamic is generative, yet in each the apparently stable ground of economic "reality" is eroded by the surprising power of imaginative human culture.

Primitivism

These two strands of modernity are interwoven, inseparably part of the broader cultural entanglements that first took place in the early modern Atlantic. To grasp their eventual reach, it will be necessary to make use of terms that had not yet been fully articulated by the early seventeenth century. Why use “primitive” when the words most often used to describe other cultures were along the lines of “savage,” “barbarous,” or “heathen”? Or “culture” when the thing at issue was most often called “custom,” “manners,” and the like? Why appropriate “primitivism,” a term associated most commonly with modernist artists of the early twentieth century, from Paul Gauguin to Pablo Picasso, and which seemed dead to scholarship following late-twentieth century critical reappraisals of the movement?

The simple reason is that there are no better terms, then or now, to describe the set of complex ideas expressed by the early modern writers examined in these chapters. The more significant reason is my conviction that the friction that gathers around questions of human difference and affinity has been felt before, that fully attending to these questions involves stretching lines of continuity to unexpected places while also being sensitive to the way all meaning is local meaning. And so, while the Renaissance primitivism examined in this study is certainly related to the more familiar primitivism of early twentieth-century art—which includes the valorization of the “primitive” in opposition to modern civilization—it is a distinct creation of particular circumstances. Its basic shape comes from transformations in the concepts of “nature” and “culture” within a period of dramatically expanding awareness of other peoples in space and time. The course of primitivism over the past century, however, reveals some of the tensions at work in approaching the earlier era, not least because this critical legacy has so shaped the perspective of this project. Three moments (discussed at greater length below) are of

particular importance to this perspective: the conjunction of Boasian anthropology and modernist primitivism in the early twentieth century, coinciding with the heyday and decline of European empires; the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1980s and 90s, especially in literary criticism and anthropology, a result of post-colonial struggles and a new recognition of the insidious afterlives of empire; and the current moment, characterized by the acute crises of climate, white supremacy, and global capitalism induced by legacies begun in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Atlantic World.

Primitivism in modernist art was a movement to revalue modern civilization from the outside; its practitioners often looked to non-Western artifacts, appreciated them as art rather than objects of anthropological inquiry, and found in them expressions of a more purely natural, universal humanity. In 1984, a celebratory exhibition of this movement at the Museum of Modern Art became the occasion for a sharp post-modern, post-colonial revaluing of primitivism.³ The focus shifted to the way Western artists and institutions constructed discursive fantasies of other cultures that both authorized themselves and ignored non-Western realities, including the imbalanced relations of power on which their own societies were built. The anthropologist James Clifford, who also cast a skeptical eye at the discursive practices of professional ethnography, responded to the exhibition:

The fact that rather abruptly, in the space of a few decades, a large class of non-Western artifacts came to be redefined as art is a taxonomic shift that requires critical historical discussion, not celebration. That this construction of a generous category of art pitched at a global scale occurred just as the planet's tribal peoples came massively under European political, economic, and evangelical dominion

³ For recent perspectives on both moments, see Jonathan Hay, "Primitivism Reconsidered (Part 1): A Question of Attitude," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67–68 (2016–17): 61–77, Hay, "Primitivism Reconsidered (Part 2): Picasso and the Krumen," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 69/70 (2018): 227–50, and Adam Jasper, "No Drums or Spears," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67–68 (2016–17): 299–315. For a thorough account of modernist primitivism in literature and its critical legacy, see Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

cannot be irrelevant. . . . Obviously the modernist appropriation of tribal productions as art is not simply imperialist. The project involves too many strong critiques of colonialist, evolutionist assumptions. As we shall see, though, the scope and underlying logic of the “discovery” of tribal art reproduces hegemonic Western assumptions rooted in the colonial and neocolonial epoch.⁴

Even when primitivism comes with generous intentions, the effect is often to reinforce assumptions about relative levels of civilization that perpetuate a polar division of superiority and inferiority crucial to the imperialist society in which these artists lived. Even if it shifts admiring attention to the usually-despised Other, the nature of the depiction tends to be one in which the other culture itself does not really matter in its details. This critique, in concert with other critical work discussed below, marked the end of “primitivism” as a usable term.⁵

It did not mark the end of primitivism as an operative idea. The “cultural turn” of which Clifford is a part has been eclipsed, at least in the public imagination, by evolutionary explanations for seemingly all human behavior. As the perspective-shattering scale of climate change has become ever-more imposing, deep history and critical engagement with the sciences have become more attractive to scholars in the humanities.⁶ Meanwhile, interest in the Global Renaissance has flourished, while historical and anthropological work on Indigenous cultures has

⁴ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 196–7.

⁵ For example, Victor Li critiques theorists writing in the 1980s and 90s such as Marianna Torgovnick and Jürgen Habermas, who take on issues of cultural alterity, as themselves falling into the trap of primitivism. Victor Li, *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). For a response that defends the necessity of writing about the concept, see Marianna Torgovnick, “On Victor Li’s *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*,” *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (2007): 545–50.

⁶ See, for example, David Armitage and Jo Guldi, “The Long and the Short: Climate Change, Governance, and Inequality since the 1970s,” in *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 61–87. For the relationship between narratives of deep history and Indigenous history, see Christen Mucher and Gesa Mackenthun, eds., *Decolonizing “Prehistory”: Deep Time and Indigenous Knowledges in North America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021). These developments are discussed in more detail in the “Literature Review” section, below.

made possible new ways of interpreting the world outside of Europe. Many scholars are often no longer content to study bounded national units, no longer convinced that Europeans' connections to the wider world can be reduced to self-serving projections of superiority.⁷ Modernist primitivism and post-modernist critique each offered important arguments against colonialism, yet each has too often been done in a way that denies non-Europeans entry into narratives that they helped to create. These developments require an adequate terminology for apprehending the ways Europeans have historically understood such connections.

It is not my aim to rehabilitate the concept of “the primitive,” but I do want to take it seriously. This means, at a minimum, recognizing that it has been and continues to be a flexible, ambiguous, and capacious idea that exercises considerable power over the ways in which the world is understood. Over the course of this project, I have found that it also means revising some shortcomings in traditional accounts of primitivism. Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas's seminal project, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), written in the wake of modernist primitivism and the first generation of professional anthropology, set the terms that are still more or less standard.⁸ For them, “primitivism” denotes an idealized, nostalgic perception of the primitive, while “anti-primitivism” is the negative perception, associated with barbarism and savagery. Categories such as “soft” and “hard” primitivism (or “soft” and “hard” pastoral) are versions of this taxonomic organization, and suffer from the practice of extraction and abstraction with little regard to context that often characterizes the early intellectual history

⁷ For an overview of some of these developments, see Kelly Wisecup, “Cross-Cultural Encounters in Early American Literatures: From Incommensurability to Exchange,” in *A Companion to American Literature: Volume I: Origins to 1820*, ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul, Linck Johnson, and Michael Soto, (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

⁸ Arthur O. Lovejoy, and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon, 1935, rpt. 1964).

associated with Lovejoy.⁹ I have instead largely dispensed with the division between “primitivism” and “anti-primitivism” in favor of a wider, more neutral use of “primitivism,” one that better corresponds with the semantic flexibility of “the primitive” and so includes both positive and negative perceptions as well as different levels of fantasy or attention to the reality of those being perceived.¹⁰

This capacious sense of primitivism can better account for the fact that, in early modern ethnography and works interested in deep history, contradictions are more the rule than the exception. At their best (and indeed at their worst) they are conglomerate texts shot through with ambiguity. They vacillate between extremes, articulate subtle distinctions, or create a disorienting collage. They direct attention outward and inward. Their insights are theological, political, moral, artistic, anthropological (and most often confound such categories). In expanding the usual scope of the term I follow Ben Etherington’s recent reassessment of the meaning of primitivism in the twentieth century. He questions the widespread assumption that primitivism is solely the unidirectional projection of Western fantasies onto its non-Western others, and argues that it has instead been crucial in a global system of literary culture, as generative in the struggle against racist ideologies and the hegemony of the West as it has been a

⁹ David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*.” *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (2012): 493–507. This critique of Lovejoy’s decontextualized is made in Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

¹⁰ In a similar vein, I prefer a wider definition of “ethnography” so as to avoid rating the kinds of reflection on and representation of other cultures according to standards developed to establish anthropology as a scientific discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I take early modern ethnography to be any writing about or other representation of other peoples and what are usually described as their “manners and customs.” Here I follow Surekha Davies and the general practice of early modern scholars of encounter, who “include all manner of descriptive writing and of the making of images and artefacts intended to represent peoples.” Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4 note 9.

part of its histories of racism.¹¹ In the same spirit, I have also tempered the skepticism (often disdain) with which Clifford and others have handled the term, for example by using scare quotes judiciously. As with Lovejoy and Boas’s idealized categories, placing scare quotes around “primitive” and “primitivism” tends to suggest that the ideas are simplistic or naïve. While they serve to acknowledge that certain terms pose thorny problems, the awareness typically belongs entirely to the modern author.

In the same vein, my use of the quasi-anachronistic terms “primitive” and “culture” is part of an attempt to allow the early modern texts under discussion their own considerable complexity and insight. While terms of abuse such as “barbarous,” “savage,” and “heathen” could be applied to other cultures in unexpected ways—as when “heathen” cultures are found to be more virtuous than Christians, or “savagery” better describes Europeans than Indians—they remain limited in their range of motion. “Primitive” was in use during the Renaissance; it referred most often to the “primitive church” or “primitive religion,” meaning Christianity in its earliest form.¹² The Reformation—from both Protestant and Catholic vantages—brought this

¹¹ Etherington argues that “the idea that primitivism was only an ideological projection of those from the center of empire has meant that its most powerful expressions in the peripheries either have been overlooked or miscast as second-order appropriations. However vexed, primitivism holds an important place in the utopian memory of attempts to negate the social logic of globalizing capital.” Literary primitivism was a utopian project that involved adopting a perspective outside the logic of capitalist modernity, and so “Primitivists turned to the illusory and speculative capacity of artworks to reanimate the primitive remnant and reawaken the possibility of a social reconciliation with nature.” His use of the term, however, is anchored to twentieth-century contexts that are not always applicable to earlier eras. Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*, xii–xiii, xiii.

¹² It sometimes appeared in a philological sense as well, as in “the radices or primitive Hebrew words of the Old Testament.” Edward Leigh, *Critica Sacra: Observations on all the Radices Or Primitive Hebrew Words of the Old Testament in Order Alphabetical* . . . (London, Printed by G.M. for Thomas Underhill, 1642). For the early modern religious use of the term “primitive,” see Euan Cameron, “Primitivism, Patristics, and Polemic in Protestant Visions of Early Christianity,” In *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World*, ed. Katherine van Liere, Simon Ditchfield, and Howard Louthan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27–51, and David Manning, “‘That is Best, Which

sense of the primitive to the center of attention, endowed it with singular importance, and laid the ground for its later application at once to prehistory and to faraway peoples. Aspects of this process may be glimpsed in Chapter 1, as humanists and artists attempt to reconcile various non-Christian accounts of the deepest past with Christian doctrine, and in Chapter 4, where encounters with Indigenous religious beliefs force to the surface unsettling resemblances between Christian and pagan religion.

One of the classic sites of New World primitivism will serve to illustrate some of the complexities involved in the convergence of “nature,” “culture,” and “the primitive.” Michel de Montaigne’s great essay “Of Cannibals” lays out the starkest expression of cultural relativism of the age: “I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.”¹³ This radical conception of truth and cultural difference is not a passing glimpse into the skeptical abyss, but an awareness of perspective that underlies the whole of his thought. It is the basis of his total view of humanity: that, if there are any constants in human nature, they are subordinated to the infinitely variable expressions of culture, the complex of customs, beliefs, and conditions in society and as individuals that makes up the vibrancy of life. It is what makes humans interesting. And it is a view of human culture shared,

Was First’: Christian Primitivism and the Reformation Church of England, 1548–1722,” *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 13, no. 2 (2011): 153–93.

¹³ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 150–9. 152. All quotes from Montaigne are from this translation unless noted otherwise. Analyzing early English readers’ notes on Montaigne’s *Essays*, William M. Hamlin finds that “No topic intrigued these readers more than custom.” Hamlin, “Florio’s Montaigne and the Tyranny of ‘Custome’: Appropriation, Ideology, and Early English Readership of the *Essays*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 63 (2010): 491–544, 491.

in different ways and degrees, by the other authors in this study, including many humanists of the Italian Renaissance, Thomas More, Walter Raleigh, and William Shakespeare. The expanding capacity to make the contingent, human-made sphere of culture the grounds of one's apprehension of the world is one of the crucial developments of the Renaissance, and owes its rise to the literary and humanistic engagement with the perplexing realities of the New World.

Montaigne comes to this realization by looking to and speaking with the Indigenous inhabitants of Brazil. Their culture, as he understands it, has the features of primitive societies imagined to live closer to the state of nature, which creates for them a life that seems far more desirable than the one possible in contemporary France, cannibalism and all. That is, they have no traffic, no magistrates, no occupation, no property, and so on.¹⁴ The conventional description was lifted almost verbatim by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, where the new island inspires in Gonzalo dreams of the ideal commonwealth he would institute, he says, "had I plantation of this isle":

I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things, for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all,
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty—
.....

¹⁴ In the Florio translation of 1603, "It is a nation . . . that hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politic superiority; no use of service, of riches, or of poverty; no contracts, no successions, no dividences, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but common; no apparel, but natural; no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corn, or metal. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon were never heard of amongst them." "Of the Cannibals" in *Shakespeare's Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays: A Selection*, trans. John Florio, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Peter G. Platt, (New York: New York Review of Books, 2014), 61.

All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavor: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.¹⁵

Both views rest on an understanding of what King Lear calls, under very different circumstances, “unaccommodated man” as happy and prosperous in his original condition.¹⁶ The state is defined “by contraries,” by removing the things humans have accumulated as culture: things that are material, like metal and bounded land, things that are immaterial human inventions, like letters or the name of magistrate, and things that are habitual practices, like occupation and succession. Culture in this view encompasses them all, and few items on such a list do not share in each category of human fashioning. Even the stuff that seems most directly brought forth by nature—metal, corn, wine, oil—is woven into a web of human transformations that creates engines of war, contracts, riches, poverty, service, traffic, and the rest.

“Off, off, you lendings!”¹⁷ To Montaigne and Gonzalo, stripping away these aspects of human life is part of a dream of egalitarian prosperity and moral innocence. (To Lear, it is a desperate attempt to escape the world’s corruption.) As metal, wealth, and title are cast off, so too goes deviousness. The more devious Sebastian and Antonio are quick to point out a wrinkle in this vision: “Yet he would be king on’t,” “The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.”¹⁸ Amid the articulation of this old yet still radical fantasy of universal equality,

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 2.1.137–59. All quotations of Shakespeare are from this edition.

¹⁶ *King Lear*, 3.4.97.

¹⁷ *King Lear*, 3.4.98–9.

¹⁸ *The Tempest*, 2.1.152–3.

freedom, and happiness creeps the specter of domination, the temptations of power that suffuse more vicious accounts of life in nature. The ambitions and cruelties identified as expressions of culture are not shaken off so easily. They may even be the foundation of human nature, inherent in the “poor, bare, forked animal.”¹⁹

This primitivism is often taken to be naïve, one of the simplistic ideas governing much of the past from which some may break free from time to time. For both Montaigne and Shakespeare, however, a certain naïveté is part of the point. Montaigne dwells on the ways in which too much learning can distort one’s vision. One who is well practiced at sorting tends to re-sort the world by habit before it can be taken as it is. Modern readers may rightly bristle at the portrayal of the natives’ natural simplicity, yet he was one of the few to tie this conventional perception to an intellectual and moral responsibility to recognize and reject one’s own prejudices. What he hopes to cast off are not just the particular features of civilized life, but the belief in them as an immutable and external reality. The exercise is part of his larger expression of how the variable culture of titles and property and occupation entrench a certain view of things that is no more anchored in reality, and in all likelihood less so, than a view from somewhere else. The preface to the *Essais* underscores how thoroughly he had adopted this lesson: “Had I been among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet freedom of nature’s first laws, I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked.”²⁰

So too Gonzalo’s fantasy, it is true, does not give us a good picture of the singular Caliban. But it does suggest the proximity between Prospero’s “humane care” for the untutored

¹⁹ *King Lear*, 3.4.97–8.

²⁰ “To the Reader,” *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Frame, 3.

Caliban and his will to power.²¹ It prepares us for the thorny problems of property, dispossession, labor, and liberty (not to mention wine or treason) their relationship bodies forth in all the particularity of their story. We see more clearly how the story itself is created at every level by the same human interpretation, its meaning as subject to *fictio*—making—and partial perspective as anything in artificial culture. In both cases the role of the simple, naïve, or primitive is to generate proliferating complexity. Sebastian and Antonio's assertion that society is grounded on an ambitious human nature exposes Gonzalo's blind spot, yet at the same time his primitivist story exposes how these villains, avatars of the highest levels of civilization, write their own predilections into what they claim to be the firm ground of universal nature. The assertion of a final, immovable perspective from nature or from culture becomes a game of endless undercutting in which one ground gives way to another which gives way in turn. The latter end always forgets the beginning.

Nature and Culture

Shakespeare and Montaigne were tapping into one of the richest veins opened up during the Renaissance as Europe came into contact with the New World. This study focuses on figures who could respond to the first shockwaves during a period in which the terms had not yet been set—figures like Niccolò Machiavelli and Piero di Cosimo, Thomas More and Amerigo Vespucci, Walter Raleigh and Thomas Harriot, Montaigne and Shakespeare—but it does so in the understanding that they are embedded in much longer narratives.

²¹ *The Tempest*, 1.2.346.

For example, the vein of New World primitivism would prove exceptionally productive during the Enlightenment, a story that is often told as a philosophical one beginning with the seventeenth-century theorists of the “state of nature,” most notably Thomas Hobbes (1655) and John Locke (1688), and spreading out into the human and natural sciences.²² Such a story would also include Francis Bacon’s experimental science (1620), Hugo Grotius’s natural law (1625), Isaac Newton’s mechanical philosophy (1687), Joseph-François Lafitau’s comparative ethnology (1724), Giambattista Vico’s deep history (1725), Montesquieu’s constitutional political theory (1748), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s primitivist critique of civilization (1755), among others.²³ Hobbes’s well-known description of the state of war that precedes the social contract is an expression of the same convention:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death;

²² A recent intellectual history of the Enlightenment that examines many aspects of this development can be found in Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013). For Enlightenment thought in its colonial context, see Daniel Carey and Lynn M. Festa, eds., *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). And for Enlightenment anthropology, see Marco Cipolloni and Larry Wolff, eds., *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

²³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980). Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, trans. James Spedding and Robert Leslie Ellis, ed. John M. Robertson, (London: George Routledge and Sons, rpt. 1905), Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace: Including the Law of Nature and of Nations*, trans. A. C. Campbell, (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1979). Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Robert Thorpe. (London: Dawsons, 1969). Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. and trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974). Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, trans. David Marsh, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001). Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, revised by J.V. Prichard. (Littleton, CO: FBRothman, 1991). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Franklin Philip, ed. Patrick Coleman, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009).

And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.²⁴

Like Montaigne and Shakespeare, Hobbes separates the features that constitute human civil society from the sphere of nature. For Hobbes, it is self-interest that is the most basic and perhaps the sole inborn characteristic of human nature. All the creations of culture, on the other hand, are artificial consequences of the initial bargain of civil society, a bargain to maximize pleasure and avoid pain. The division of worldly phenomena into an autonomous, objective sphere of nature, governed by discoverable laws, and culture, the artificial ways in which humans create and organize their experience of the world, is the crucial paradigm underlying the sciences developed by the Enlightenment figures above and, to many critics from Michel Foucault to Bruno Latour to Donna Haraway, the crux of modernity.²⁵

It may be tempting to view sixteenth-century writers as no more than pre-cursors to the more robust thinkers above. There is a distinct advantage, however, in eschewing the Enlightenment theorists in favor of the less systematic thinkers of the earlier period. Though the Enlightenment authors certainly approached the issues at hand more directly and systematically, they also did so within an established philosophical discourse and as part of a concerted effort to advance the body of human knowledge. They each aimed, more or less, to present and codify a system of thought all their own. The writers who populate this study came in all stripes, and experimented with ideas that clearly resonated with other aspects of their culture. Significantly,

²⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970, rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1994). Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). See also Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

for my argument, the texts on which I focus traffic consciously in the literary imagination, and so, if they sometimes play fast and loose with these ideas as ideas, they do so because of a humanistic sensitivity to the complex fabric of culture. Ideas, along with everything else, are situated in culture; they are perspectival, dialogic, instrumental, part of other plots, constructed in particular situations. The writers in this study were not debating the precise meaning of humanity's original condition for its own sake, at least in the texts I have found to be most alive, but were usually attempting to entertain and enthrall, provoke and persuade, to generate aesthetic wonder through flights of imagination or descriptions of the real. They sought, and often achieved, a wide reach. The different evocations of primitivism in this era therefore speak to its status as an exceptionally adaptable way to imagine a world in flux, a way of thinking not limited to a narrow few but that is consciously embedded in the wider culture. In our own time, in which the claims of "nature" on ultimate reality seem to have reached a saturation point through the widespread application of evolutionary biology and psychology, a pre-Enlightenment emphasis on the expansive explanatory power of culture may prove salutary.²⁶

The basic dualism between nature and culture was not, to be sure, a new idea. In these early modern expressions it is understood to be universal, and many since have considered it to be one of the most fundamental characteristics of human experience. Claude Lévi-Strauss, aiming to discover unity amid the enormous diversity of myths found across the globe, posited that humans everywhere organize their experience through a limited set of binary oppositions.²⁷

²⁶ For a wide survey of the way "nature" has figured into various philosophies and cosmologies, see Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

²⁷ This project was undertaken in the four volumes of *Mythologiques*. See especially Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques, Volume 1*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

One of the most important of these is that between nature and culture, the raw and the cooked, the world as it is outside of human intervention and that which has been fashioned by humans. Recent work in anthropology, however, has posed a formidable challenge to this assumption. The anthropologist Philippe Descola, looking at a wide variety of cultures throughout the world, argues that the Western “naturalism” that divides the world into categories of nature and culture is only one of the many possible ways in which people actually imagine the relationship between human and non-human worlds.²⁸ Having become acquainted with Amazonian cultures for whom the division does not exist, in which non-human beings participate fully in the sphere of cultural relations and the domesticated home is continuous with rather than distinguished from the wilderness outside, Descola finds that such ways of organizing reality are closer to the rule than the exception. The Western dualism between nature and culture—each defined in antithetical relation to the other—now seems to be a far more provincial and recent habit of mind than it once did.²⁹

The cusp of the new naturalist cosmology, for Descola, exists between Montaigne and Hobbes. It did not emerge *sui generis* in seventeenth-century Europe, however, but rather grew out of a series of contingent developments that overlapped to form the composite of Western culture, beginning with the Neolithic revolution in Southwest Asia. Societies that organize themselves into cities and depend on agriculture are likely to develop very different notions about the natural world from hunter-gatherers, especially when it comes to distinguishing between what has been actively cultivated by humans and what has not. Not coincidentally,

²⁸ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). See also Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish, (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014).

²⁹ See also Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

“culture,” as Raymond Williams writes, has only recently branched off from its traditional root, *cultivare*, to cultivate or grow, usually in reference to agriculture.³⁰ Humans have been interacting closely and ingeniously with their natural environment as long as they have existed, and so even beginning ten thousand years ago the conditions of settled Neolithic life represent a small slice of human experience. Smaller still if the agricultural revolutions in different areas of the world gave rise to different points of continuity and discontinuity (where, for instance, plants were domesticated but animals were not). Mediterranean agricultural practices solidified a particularly strict version of the separation between the opposed *domus* and *silva*, an enduring legacy along with the Roman values associated with each. Christianity compounded this hierarchical division between the domesticated and the wild with the explicit scriptural command that humans exercise dominion over the earth and its creatures, which were created for their use. To the Aristotelian system of nature, organized by taxonomy and governed by laws, Christianity added the notion of human transcendence. Humans were separated from and elevated above this remote nature, while the earth itself became a temporary stage that they would eventually live without.³¹ From these circumstantial materials, the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century invented a new and peculiar notion of nature, mechanical and systematic, governed by laws, discoverable through empirical investigation, and above all separate from humans.³²

³⁰ He writes, “Culture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals.” He also claims that “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76.

³¹ This notion that the natural world will come to an end is, according to Descola, “at odds not only with the ideas of pagan antiquity but also with most of the cosmologies that ethnography and history have recorded.” Descola, 66.

³² Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 30–88. This narrative corresponds with classic accounts of Western attitudes toward nature, including Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (1967, New York: Penguin Putnam, 2008). Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility*, (New York:

Given this long view of the particularly modern habit of mind, the early modern period of transition is of special interest. The recognition that “nature” and “culture” are the warp and woof of Western modernity with its triumphs, crimes, and catastrophes has provoked urgent intellectual responses over the past several decades. The framework has tended to promote claims to universality, and has been the source of both an egalitarian recognition of common humanity that should be championed (Jonathan Israel) and the enabling justifications for Europe’s imperial and ecological domination (Dipesh Chakrabarty). Calls to reject and transcend the naturalistic dualism of nature and culture are frequent (Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton).³³ Yet, fair as the broad-strokes account may be, it leaves out a great deal of what is recognizable as thought as it occurs in the moment, amid the tumult of history and the phantasmagoria of culture. The simplification necessary to tell such stories certainly helps to clarify matters, but it also tends to cut the heart out of the living thing it studies—that is, minds and cultures in motion, which are at once like and unlike our own.

What do we make, for instance, of Montaigne’s question, “When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?”³⁴ This is not an idle thought; it is the

Pantheon Books, 1983). and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

³³ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and his other works, including *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Phillip John Usher argues against the tendency for ecologically minded critics to use humanism as an impoverished idea to be transcended by posthumanism Phillip John Usher, *Exterranean: Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

³⁴ “Apology for Raymond Sebond” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 331.

same incisive, thorough questioning of what it means to be human, what it means to experience the world around oneself from a particular perspective that he pursues in thinking about the customs of the Tupinambá. He has not transcended the opposition between nature and culture, and in fact his insights about other ways of being rest upon precisely these opposed terms. It is rather the singular importance of these interrelated categories for Montaigne that makes possible the freedom of his thought. For that matter, lest this seem like a pre-modern oddity, where should we locate my own (not uncommon) sense that the terms become entangled in even the most mundane parts of life? When I give my dog a treat, and she takes it to her bed to eat it, is she not engaging in the symbolic reasoning we usually call culture? The bed has become meaningful to her as some kind of property over which she exercises some kind of ownership. She is following rules that she has seemingly devised herself and that are far more symbolic and social than practical (there is no physical barrier between her bed and me, and anyway I gave her the treat). Inhabiting the naturalist paradigm of Western modernity, in Descola's schema, I do not consider her human. But neither do I find an absolute divide between my own "cultural" meaning-making and hers, nor between what is "natural" in our practices of consumption.

Animals, Lévi-Strauss writes, are good to think with.³⁵ And they are good to think with because nature and culture each make legitimate claims on the same vast territory; the result of the contest is an endlessly flexible way of configuring and reconfiguring the world. I have given anthropology a lead role in the story—as opposed to valid alternatives such as natural science, philosophy, or political theory—because it is constitutionally most concerned with the diverse

³⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 89. In early modern studies, cf. Bruce Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

ways humans make meaning out of circumstances that are both natural and cultural, both largely fashionable and largely beyond their control. Marjorie Garber, glossing Lévi-Strauss's original phrase, articulates the significance of the perspective on culture that is anthropology's constant theme; it is, it turns out, not only broadly applicable but also inescapable:

[Lévi-Strauss:] "The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied; their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think.'"

Bon à penser. Animals, Lévi-Strauss said, are "good to think [with]." This phrase is not really a maxim about animals (or science, or feminism, or hypertext, or any of the other things critics have said are 'good to think with')—it is not about the referent, the thing in the world; it is a celebration and a validation of thinking. Thinking that may have its initial impetus in "empirical observations," those vital signs of the social sciences, the physical sciences, or the life sciences, but its payoff is in speculation, which is then reattached to, embodied in, or reembodyed in the objects, concepts, or beings that gave rise to it. Now the empirical (or edible) facts reemerge as figures of speech or, more precisely, figures of thought: metaphors, metonyms, personifications, allegories, categories, oppositions, analogies—the work product of the humanities.³⁶

The humanities, so conceived, are the study of culture, and culture, so conceived, has its roots in the Renaissance. Two of the most vital of these roots are, first, the *studia humanitatis* itself, that axle of the Italian Renaissance, meaning the study of human arts, especially language, and second, the object of ethnography, what early modern writers usually referred to as the "customs, manners, laws, and religions" of faraway peoples and what we would refer to as "culture" or "cultures." The endlessly flexible, immensely powerful way of giving shape to the world through a divided "nature" and "culture," both claiming to encompass all, emerged in its particular form

³⁶ Marjorie Garber, "Good to Think With," in *Loaded Words* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 97.

from the heats and pressures of this moment.³⁷ For us, the thinking is the point. And so the better course of action, in my view, is to attempt rather to understand how this schema has shaped our world than to attempt to dispense with it altogether.

“Culture,” the concept that the field of anthropology takes as its core object, has only recently been precisely articulated in the form that I will use throughout this study. Its seminal definition comes from E. B. Tylor in 1871, describing “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”³⁸ Tylor’s definition partially overlaps with the nineteenth-century notion of “civilization” and at that time implicitly or explicitly shared in its assumptions of hierarchy and progress. The idea that societies evolved along a universal track, progressing by stages from barbarism to civilization, was widespread—we often find it in the Renaissance, and

³⁷ See Williams, *Keywords* for a genealogy of usage for both “nature” and “culture.” He stresses, as I will, that “in general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant.” Williams, 80. I would also stress, as many others would not, that the conceptual territory exists and is available for thought even when the precise definition has not been articulated. My claim is therefore not that these ideas about “culture,” “nature,” “the primitive,” or the attitude of cultural relativism were unthinkable before the sixteenth century—indeed, they are ideas that seem likely to occur, at least in a fuzzy way, to almost anyone who thinks about their human and non-human surroundings long enough, and anyway the record of what has been thought is a vanishingly small fraction of what has actually been thought. That much is clear from the medieval precedents that cover similar ground, including complex traditions of imagining pre- and post-lapsarian humanity in the garden of Eden and the conditions of early biblical history, natural law theories, the figure of the “wild man” or “wodewose,” the cultural reflections of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and a wider body of ethnography than has often been taken seriously. But in my view the novel perspectives, influence, and reach of Renaissance humanism and New World ethnography together created habits of thought of a particular form and prominence that can be fairly said to be uniquely characteristic of the Renaissance culture. For medieval thought on Eden, see Alastair J. Minnis, *From Eden to Eternity: Creations of Paradise in the Later Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). For the “wild man” and other ways of testing the limits of the human, see Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For medieval ethnography, see Shirin A. Khanmohamadi, *In Light of Another’s Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

³⁸ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Customs* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1871), preface.

it gained a complex theoretical apparatus in the centuries since. This sense helped to create the situation critiqued in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, in which "Culture" becomes a repository for the highest and most refined achievements of the arts—celebrated works of literature, for example—that is separated and sealed off from the more sordid spheres of history, politics, and economics.³⁹

In the early twentieth century, Franz Boas and his students (Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Alfred L. Kroeber, Zora Neale Hurston, among others) transformed the concept into the relativist, non-hierarchical, anti-essentialist culture concept that has been the primary meaning, at least for anthropologists, ever since. "Culture" became "cultures," not something achieved by transcending savagery but a universal and variable possession, understood to be how distinct peoples distinctively organize their experience. Each belief or practice only makes sense, therefore, if understood relative to that culture's entire way of understanding and being in the world. To that end it retained the sense of being "that complex whole" that encompasses nearly every aspect of human life, the "total way of life of a people" or "their complete 'design for living'" to Clyde Kluckhohn.⁴⁰ Boasian culture (and Boas himself) explicitly rejected the scientific racism that grounded the study of humanity on supposed biological differences between races. He showed, empirically, that what were widely perceived as the innate differences between races discovered by phrenology were merely prejudices invested in the physical evidence and then reinterpreted according to the same cultural ideas about natural superiority and inferiority. Skull size and other objective measures depended on local

³⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

⁴⁰ Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man; the Relation of the Anthropology to Modern Life* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1949), 17. Qtd. in Alfred L. Kroeber, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum, 1952), 51.

circumstances; interpretations based on objective nature, being interpretations, are shaped by local culture too (which does not, of course, mean that one interpretation is no better than the other).⁴¹ Culture was what gave the biological or environmental facts of life—sex, aggression, food, etc.—the limitless diversity of forms they take around the globe.

Culture, then, is how the world becomes meaningful. In this study I primarily follow influential anthropologists working in the second half of the twentieth century, who emphasized this symbolic character of culture and understood its study to be a primarily interpretive endeavor. As Clifford Geertz writes, “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”⁴² To attend to speculative, human meaning-making is by no means to deny the reality of the referent, the brute facts out there in the world. Humans are suspended in webs of significance not because they live in a world of pure solipsistic ideation, but because they live in a world of mothers and corporations, wild horses and domesticated ones, cheese and worms, greenhouse gas emissions, brainpans, books, iron, gold, wine, and land. Culture is how we come to know and think with things as they really are, whether we like it or not.

Returning to the early modern state of nature, Hobbes’s “ill condition, which man by meer Nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it,” it is clear that something very like the modern sense of nature and culture is at work. What seems at first to be a stark shift between mutually exclusive conditions turns out to be a process of negotiation or

⁴¹ Charles King, *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 2019). Boas’s ideas are laid out in Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1911).

⁴² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973, rpt. 2000), 5.

translation between the fixed realities of nature and the variable symbolic inventions of culture. In this state of nature, “there be no Propriety, no Dominion, no *Mine* and *Thine* distinct; but onely that to be every mans, that he can get; and for so long, as he can keep it.”⁴³ To Hobbes the most natural, innate human quality is acquisitive self-interest; civilization is marked by ways of codifying versions of the same acquisitiveness into “mine and thine.” A significant difference, certainly, but also a site of extensive overlap.

This crux between nature and culture is how Renaissance humanists came to understand the first age of human history; the “primitive,” therefore, is not simply a stable original form but a site of complex transformation. The Renaissance, in its heightened sense of culture as the product of human art, in its obsession with the ancient and original, brought the primitive to the center of attention even as it multiplied the kinds of antiquities available for speculative experiment. Thus, I argue, the primitive became a unique imaginative formation of the Renaissance. It was not unique in expression—most cultures privilege what happened in the beginning or long ago as the source of great significance—but rather unique because the novel approach to the human world established by humanism was joined to the European encounter with the New World. The understanding of the primitive as an intersection between nature and culture became an inseparable part of the colonial and capitalist relations that emerged within a connected Atlantic World. It gained its cultural force because New World ethnography provided a way of experiencing actually existing ways of life that stretched the limits of imagination. And it was literature that most thoroughly connected the real—the world reachable, if never

⁴³ Hobbes, 90.

absolutely, by experience and ethnography—and the imaginative process by which reality is made meaningful.

Primitivism, Ethnography, and the New World: Literature Review

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”⁴⁴ The familiar conflation of spatial and temporal axes was the almost unquestioned assumption of this period.⁴⁵ And so Hobbes’s remote past may be illustrated as a present condition elsewhere, for “there are many places, where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of *America*, except the government of small Families, the concord whereof dependeth on naturall lust, have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before.”⁴⁶ John White included among his great watercolor illustrations to Thomas Harriott’s *Brief and True Report of Virginia* (1590) images of ancient Picts and Britons “to shoue how that the Inhabitants of the great Britannie have bin in times past as savvage as those of Virginia.”⁴⁷ The first English use of the word “anthropology” appears in 1593 to refer to the study of ancient British arts and

⁴⁴ L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamilton, 1953), 9.

⁴⁵ Indeed, it remains a widespread assumption. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

⁴⁶ Hobbes, 89. See also Mary Nyquist, “Contemporary Ancestors of de Bry, Hobbes, and Milton,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2008): 837–75.

⁴⁷ Thomas Harriot and John White, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), 75. Anthony Welch points out that “This trope became widespread in the early seventeenth century. Robert Burton observes, ‘see but what Cesar reports of us, and Tacitus of those old Germans, they were once as uncivill as they in Virginia’ (*The Anatomy of Melancholy* [London, 1621], 51), while *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, 9.6.4.1755, poses the question, ‘Were not Caesars Britaines as brutish as Virginians?’” Anthony Welch, “Anthropology and Anthropophagy in the *Faerie Queene*,” *Spenser Studies* 30, (2015): 167–192. 191 note 37.

culture.⁴⁸ Ethnography, and particularly New World ethnography, immediately cross-pollinated with other modes of inquiry into human culture.

The importance of this historical-geographical primitivism has been widely recognized in scholarly accounts of European intellectual history, of encounter and colonial expansion, of the development of scientific anthropology, of the European representation of its others, of modern historical consciousness, and of the artistic expressions that accompanied all of these histories. This scholarship has been extraordinarily illuminating, including some of the most significant contributions to the wider understanding of modernity over the past century or so. For the sake of simplicity, we might divide the last century of scholarship on these topics into three movements. I will label them “Taxonomy and Teleology,” “Discourse and Resistance,” and “Decentering and Entangling.”

Taxonomy and Teleology. The classic scholarly account of primitivism is concerned with the speculative histories of classical Greco-Roman thought. As mentioned above, Lovejoy and Boas’s monumental project, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), documents a set of ideas about the primitive that the authors believed could be found throughout European history.⁴⁹ A work of early intellectual history by some of the field’s founders, its approach is the Aristotelian extraction and classification by type of as many examples as possible. Sorted into “primitivism” and “anti-primitivism,” the opposition could be applied by others to early modernity and portrayed as an ethnological debate between interpretations of Indians as golden

⁴⁸ Welch, 173. He argues that modern cultural anthropology has its foundations in this early modern convergence of comparative ethnology and world history. See also Andrew Hadfield, “Bruited Abroad: John White and Thomas Harriot’s Colonial Representations of Ancient Britain,” *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*, ed. David J. Baker and Willy Maley, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159–177.

⁴⁹ Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*.

age innocents or cannibalistic savages, or posed as “primitivism” vs. “progressivism” to designate far-reaching ideological interpretations of history. In Peter Burke’s *Renaissance Sense of the Past* (1969) and Arthur B. Ferguson’s work on early modern versions of pre-history, for example, they are used to contrast a predominant narrative of decline from an illustrious past in the sixteenth century to the cult of progress of the seventeenth.⁵⁰ Examples from across the literature could be collected and sorted to reveal important intellectual traditions, such as those identified in Harry Levin’s *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (1969).⁵¹ Primitivism is significant, in much earlier scholarship, as part of a European history of ideas approachable by taxonomy.

The old narrative about primitivism was accompanied by a complementary narrative about ethnography, similarly attentive to the way the progressive and rationalist ideologies of later centuries could be pre-figured in the Renaissance. According to these narratives, Europeans slowly free themselves from the imaginative constructions taken from ancient authorities—at least the more fanciful ones—as experience and curiosity lead toward the scientific study of other cultures. Margaret Hodgen’s still-unsurpassed survey of early modern ethnography, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1964), makes the convincing case that as European empiricism developed, they found progressively better methods by which to represent and therefore understand the diversity of cultures they encountered.⁵² John Howland

⁵⁰ Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), Arthur B. Ferguson, *Clio Unbound: Perception of the Social and Cultural Past in Renaissance England* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979). and Ferguson, *Utter Antiquity: Perceptions of Prehistory in Renaissance England* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁵¹ Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁵² Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964). Hodgen is also the author of the influential study of Victorian-

Rowe (1965) and Fred Voget (1975) likewise located the origins of anthropology in the Renaissance.⁵³ As ideas of progress and development take hold, according to this narrative, the idealized allure of the primitive is demystified—except, at times, as an imaginative construction by which to critique one’s own civilization, a position that has little to do with the realities of others.

Discourse and Resistance. Beginning in about 1970, scholarship turned new eyes toward the New World in modern history and the role of the primitive in the European representation of its others. The cultural milieu that made the intellectual genealogy of primitivism and ethnography suggestive topics for Lovejoy and Boas, Hodgen, Panofsky, and others—the primitivism of modernist painting; the apex and decline of European colonial empires; Boasian anthropology; the Freudian diagnosis of civilization’s repression of the primitive unconscious; the need to authoritatively establish academic disciplines; after World War I, the acute sense that European civilization was faltering—had given way to another—struggles for decolonization and civil rights; the rapid expansion of universities; the Cold War suffusion of ideology, the expansion of global capitalism, and post-modern responses; other fault-lines along which Western civilization appeared to again be faltering.

One result of the shift was that the generally de-contextualized intellectual history of Lovejoy and Boas was re-situated into its cultural contexts, and subjected to a new level of critique, by the outpouring of scholarship on European imaginative constructions of the

era primitivism, *The Doctrine of the Survivals: A Chapter in the History of Scientific Method in the Study of Man* (London: Allenson and Company, 1936).

⁵³ John Howland Rowe, “The Renaissance Foundations of Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 1 (1965): 1–20. Fred W. Voget, *A History of Ethnology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).

Indigenous Other. The celebrated figure of “Renaissance Man” was shown to be constructed from the same stuff as Western imperial culture, the subjectivity of the modern West was revealed to be yoked to the construction of “primitive” Others. The essays in *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (1973), including Hayden White’s “The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea” helped to establish a more post-modern, discursively- and ideologically-embedded understanding of the ways in which the concept of the primitive has signified in European intellectual history.⁵⁴ All representations are mediated by power, and primitivism, no matter how affirmative of the peoples deemed primitive, could be shown to reinscribe the hierarchical division of civilized and primitive, West and non-West, self and other that it nominally sought to critique.

The new scholarship, always wary of the ways discourse self-justifies, tended to set itself in opposition to the teleological, triumphalist trajectories of Whig history and imperial history. Under the otherwise very different influences of Quentin Skinner and Michel Foucault, discourse became king.⁵⁵ In a move that has largely held sway ever since, J. H. Elliott put forward his “blunted impact” thesis in 1970, which claimed that the news of the New World was for a long time of minor concern in Europe and hardly constituted the Kuhnian “paradigm shift” that had traditionally been claimed.⁵⁶ Instead, at least until the eighteenth century, information about

⁵⁴ Edward J. Dudley and Maximillian E. Novak, eds., *The Wild Man Within: an Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973). See also Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

⁵⁶ J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New 1492–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). See also Peter Burke, “America and the Rewriting of World History,” and J. H. Elliott, “Final Reflections: The Old World and the New Revisited,” in *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 42–44, 391–408.

Indigenous cultures and new lands was easily assimilated into existing discursive frameworks: biblical history, the golden age, ancient knowledge, and so on.⁵⁷

Stephen Greenblatt's introduction of a "poetics of culture" set the course for subsequent literary study as situated in culture, and helped to establish a significant role for literary criticism in the history of exploration and colonization.⁵⁸ Geertz's "thick description" could be applied to the traditional objects of literary and historical study to reveal a vibrant, powerful cultural field.⁵⁹ The virtue of this criticism was its close attention to the ways texts—in connection with other features of culture, which could be read as texts—construct meaning within the vast and dynamic system of culture. Literature is therefore centrally involved in the course of history. The New World, previously marginal to Renaissance literary studies, became one of its most urgent concerns. Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991), for example, analyzed the shock of encounter through the foundational experience of wonder it

For an opposing view, see Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Travel Writing and Humanistic Culture: A Blunted Impact?" *Journal of Early Modern History* 10, no. 1 (2006): 131–68.

⁵⁷ Other works interrogated the relationship between the traditionally-imagined Renaissance and the New World, not always with such a strong contrarian thesis as Elliott. Charles Trinkhaus, "Renaissance and Discovery," in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*, ed. Fredi Chiapelli et al., 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 1.4–5. David Beers Quinn, "Renaissance Influences in English Colonization," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (1976): 73–93.

⁵⁸ Greenblatt's "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century" (1976) connected Renaissance literature and New World colonization through ideas about language and civilization operative in the colonial project. Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22–51. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, rpt. 2005) and Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) both develop the idea of cultural circulation between literary works and representations of other cultures in the New World and elsewhere. For a theoretical statement on New Historicism see also Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 196–215.

⁵⁹ Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973, rpt. 2000), 3–32.

provoked, an aesthetic response which exists in a tight yet complex relation to the appetite for possession.⁶⁰ If works on ethnography such as Anthony Pagden's *Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (1987) and Mary Baine Campbell's *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing 400-1600* (1988) find a familiar upward trajectory of Europeans' ability to think about and represent others, the application of literary analysis (Campbell) and fine-grained focus on the contextual basis of cultural ideas (Pagden) generated new ways of understanding the history of European cultural encounter with the New World.⁶¹

So too did the intense critique of Western colonial history, both the real violence enacted on others and its ways of perpetuating its power through self-legitimizing discourse. Michel de Certeau explored how the writing was used as a tool of colonialism in *The Writing of History* (1975, 1988 in English), Tzvetan Todorov put discourse and semiotics at the center of the narrative in *The Conquest of America* (1982), Giuliano Gliozzi excoriated humanists who used their historical knowledge to aid and abet colonial empires in *Adamo e il Nuovo Mondo* (1977), and Walter Mignolo connected the horrors of the New World colonial project to literary and

⁶⁰ Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, rpt. 2017). See also the essays in Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. *New World Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁶¹ Mary Baine Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Pagden has expanded on these interests in other significant studies, including Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). and Pagden, *Facing Each Other: the World's Perception of Europe and Europe's Perception of the World* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate/Variorum, 2000). Other important works on ethnography include Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Rubiés, *Travellers and Cosmographers: Studies in the History of Early Modern Travel and Ethnology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

cultural discourses in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995).⁶² This approach intersected fruitfully with post-colonial criticism, with work by Ania Loomba, Peter Hulme, and Jyotsna Singh bringing pivotal developments in the history of race and colonization into view.⁶³ New Historicism and post-colonial criticism significantly broadened deepened the field, especially as it reached the high-water mark of the late 1980s and 90s.

One of the perennial avenues for inquiry was the extent to which the newness of the New World could break through the intransigent structures of European consciousness, whether knowledge about radically different ways of life truly challenged European ways of thinking or was easily assimilated. Anthony Grafton's *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (1992) generally follows Elliott's "blunted impact" thesis, seeing a transition from fealty to ancient authorities to the triumph of experience that was much slower, and less shocking, than one might expect.⁶⁴ William Hamlin (1995) finds a greater capacity on

⁶² Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard,

(New York: Harper & Row, 1984). Giuliano Gliozzi, *Adamo e il Nuovo Mondo: La Nascita dell'Antropologia come Ideologia Coloniale* (Florence: Sansoni, 1977). See also Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Gesa Mackenthun, *Metaphors of Dispossession: American Beginnings and the Translation of Empire, 1492–1637* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

⁶³ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism-Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 2002), Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002), Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London: Routledge, 1986), Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, eds., *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ivo Kamps and Jyotsna G. Singh, eds., *Travel Knowledge: European "Discoveries" in the Early Modern Period*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), Shankar Raman, *Renaissance Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

the part of at least a few early modern authors to appreciate the difference posed by the New World, suggesting that writing by figures such as Montaigne and Shakespeare broke out of the simple categories of savagery and civility and should therefore be considered a kind of early ethnography.⁶⁵ Overall, though, Europeans had to learn over the course of centuries how to see accurately the difference of the New World, and in the meantime early modern writers remained in thrall to imagination, unable to see New World realities, let alone represent them.

If these movements greatly expanded the field of critical inquiry, in practice they often set up limitations that remain well worth testing. The Cambridge School had its narrowed scope, the dictum to understand a culture in its own terms. Along with their distaste for the grand narratives and presentist teleology of Whig history, and alongside the growth of microhistory, the scholarship of this period tended to create a history made up of a multitude of pockets and case studies, privileging texts over the many other manifestations of history.⁶⁶ In a similar vein, the New Historicists and others who contributed to the broad post-modern critique often took Foucault's *épistème* model for granted, making suspect claims about what it was possible to think in a given era and disclaiming the possibility of *longue durée* analysis. And in attending to the mediated transmission of all representation, they frequently treated New World writing as absolutely recursive, as if it were only possible to uncover the imaginations of Europeans. Out of respect for the integrity of others, the scholarship tended to create a history consisting mostly of what Europeans thought.

⁶⁵ William Hamlin, *The Image of America in Montaigne, Spenser, and Shakespeare: Renaissance Ethnography and Literary Reflection*, (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1995).

⁶⁶ David Armitage, "What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*." *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (2012): 493–507, and David Armitage and Jo Guldi. *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Decentering and Entangling. The developments of the later twentieth century set the stage for the scholarship of the past two decades, which has spread out in many different directions in the hope of creating a more global humanities. The Atlantic World became a major site of study as part of an effort to re-situate typically national histories within larger international networks. Histories of race, Atlantic slavery, ecology, and colonial capitalism have flourished within this connected framework.⁶⁷ But the earlier emphasis on the New World was also questioned, for looking to Europe's complex relationships to other parts of Asia, Africa, and especially the Islamic world provided new angles on Europe that unsettled ideas about its exceptionalism, its modernity, and its sense of superiority.⁶⁸ Works such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) argued that a proper understanding of history involves decentering Europe within global histories and questioning the standards it has established as

⁶⁷ See, for example, Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), Trevor G. Burnard, *The Atlantic in World History, 1490–1830* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), Sujata Iyengar, *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), Philip Beidler and Gary Taylor, eds., *Writing Race Across the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), Rebecca Ann Bach, *Colonial Transformations: The Cultural Production of the New Atlantic World 1580–1640* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), Onur Ulas Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶⁸ Joan Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), John Archer, *Old Worlds: Egypt, Southwest Asia, India, and Russia in Early Modern English Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), Barbara Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Richmond Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East 1576–1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624* (Cranbury, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

unexamined assumptions.⁶⁹ As Ania Loomba asks, “How could the asymmetry of European and non-European relations in the New World be the key factor in European self-definition when, at the same time, Europeans desired to enter the powerful economic networks of the Mediterranean, Levant, North Africa, India, and China, feared the military might of the Turks, and were dazzled by the wealth and sophistication of many Asian kingdoms?”⁷⁰

These “connected histories” focus on the many ways cultures become bound together in the exchange of goods, people, and ideas. Following the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas’s *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (1991) “entanglement” became a key word, for Thomas signifying a “processes of mutual appropriation and unequal exchange on colonial peripheries.”⁷¹ The idea made its way to literary and historical study of the Renaissance with such works as Jerry Brotton and Lisa Jardine’s *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (2000) and has helped to engender the “global turn” in

⁶⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷⁰ Ania Loomba, “Introduction,” *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Renaissance (1450–1650)*, ed. Ania Loomba, vol. 3, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 19. Trevor Burnard makes a similar case for Atlantic history: “Practising Atlantic history is part of general historical processes that seek to provincialize Europe by denying that it was the source of all innovation and agency. As we seek for alternatives to Western-centric world views and hegemonic narratives, Atlantic history can challenge the idea of Europe as a coherent self-enveloping civilization, while acknowledging the force of European global interventions from the time of Columbus to the present.” Burnard, 27.

⁷¹ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3. See also Ralph Bauer and Marcy Norton, “Introduction: Entangled Trajectories: Indigenous and European Histories,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, no. 1, (2017): 1–17, who argue that “entanglement” is a felicitous term for early modern Atlantic studies: “Unlike some global and trans-national histories that continue to focus exclusively on the impact that Europeans had on ‘others,’ or on the formers’ ‘representations’ of the latter, entangled histories attend to the multiplicity of sources, agencies, directions of influence, and modalities of intercultural connectedness.” Bauer and Norton, 3.

early modern studies.⁷² These methods of inquiry intersected with work in Indigenous history and historical anthropology that increasingly scrutinizes oral histories, objects, and other non- or quasi-textual evidence with as much care as the textual evidence of traditional history, while environmental and post-humanist scholarship continues to draw more attention to the complex ways in which humans and objects become enmeshed.⁷³ The price has been an ever-expanding diffusion of focal points that, combined with well-justified skepticism about integrative approaches, have generally failed to produce stories with the same explanatory power and

⁷² Jerry Brotton and Lisa Jardine, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). Jyotsna G. Singh, ed., *A Companion to the Global Renaissance: English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Klaus Hock and Gesa Mackenthun, *Entangled Knowledge: Scientific Discourses and Cultural Difference* (New York: Waxmann, 2012), Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), Monica Heller and Bonnie McElhinny, *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism: Toward a Critical History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), Marília dos Santos Lopes, *Writing New Worlds: The Cultural Dynamics of Curiosity in Early Modern Europe* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2016).

⁷³ For recent work on Indigenous history, see Christen Mucher and Gesa Mackenthun, eds., *Decolonizing "Prehistory": Deep Time and Indigenous Knowledges in North America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021), and Jace Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). For historical anthropology or ethnohistory, see James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), Greg Dening, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures, and Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Neil L. Whitehead, "The Discoverie as Ethnological Text" in Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, ed. Neil L. Whitehead (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 60–116. For early modern Indigenous and European relationships to the land in North America, see Allan Greer, *Property and Dispossession: Natives, Empires and Land in Early Modern North America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For intersections between Renaissance literature and anthropology, see Andreas Höfele and Stephan Laqué, eds., *Humankind: The Renaissance and Its Anthropologies* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011). For the focus on objects in environmental thought, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For the early modern studies and the environment, see Phillip John Usher, *Exterranean: Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), and Sara Miglietti and John Morgan, eds., *Governing the Environment in the Early Modern World: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017).

narrative force of earlier scholarship.⁷⁴ Still, excellent recent studies have used these global concerns to illuminate the modernity produced by the European Renaissance in new ways: Surekha Davies has connected the Renaissance to the Atlantic world by way of ethnographic representation taking the form of maps, costume books, and geographical writing, while Ayesha Ramachandran has analyzed how early modern Europeans imaginatively re-conceived of “the world” as a whole, and tried to represent it, in response to the unprecedented global encounters of the age.⁷⁵ In the chapters that follow, I have attempted to build on the insights and methods of the most generative parts of these past movements, in particular the need to view well-established cornerstones of Western modernity within much larger and more diverse cultural fields.

One way of conceiving of this project, then, is as joining an old story—what might once have been called “The Renaissance Discovery of Man,” based on what a large handful of elite humanists told themselves they were doing—to a newer story whose traditional center of gravity has collapsed, in which the agency of historical change is found rather in larger assemblages of entangled people and things. There has been an unavoidable tension between the two stories, for the global history has long been occluded precisely by a surfeit of attention to the ways in which actors and interpreters at the center of the old story represented themselves. What people told themselves they were doing *is* crucial, of course. We cannot hope to understand the cultures of the past without perceiving as thoroughly as possible how their perspectives were constructed

⁷⁴ The sometimes amorphous quality of this scholarship is also an effect created by the proliferation of edited volumes with expansive titles and local, disconnected chapters, a situation driven largely by recent trends in academic publishing and hiring.

⁷⁵ Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

and what they saw from within them. But the same goal requires that we see those perspectives themselves as constructed from complex relations with other perspectives, from relationships to a “real” world in flux that they sometimes perceived and sometimes did not—with, for instance, the environmental and economic factors that historical-cultural inquiry has tended to treat as separate from expressions of a limited “culture.” The elite European perspectives alone cannot give us what we need from studying the past: a fuller understanding of their world and, thereby, our own. For that we are better served by entangled histories and thick description, concerted attention to the people and cultures who have been occluded in the body of evidence we have, curiosity, generosity, a healthy sense of our own limitations, and, in sum, openness to the object of study as human culture in the most capacious sense.

Chapter Overview

The questions of culture, nature, primitivism, ethnography, literature, colonial capitalism, and cultural relativism are at the core of both the old story and the newer one. The Renaissance, in connection to the New World, faced what Ayesha Ramachandran describes as “a new recognition of our existence in a radically uncertain world where we must create our own order. And it therefore emphasizes the importance of *poiesis*—artful making—as a means of . . . making sense of the pieces.”⁷⁶ All of the authors treated at length here—More, Raleigh, Shakespeare, Montaigne—had a robust sense of culture because they all perceived the complex ways in which humans create and assign significance by assembling and reassembling the pieces of their traditions, religions, customs, environments, and the rest. That is, their sense of the

⁷⁶ Ramachandran, 8.

nebulous totality of life whose core is human meaning-making was as clear to many denizens of the past as it is to most of us: i.e., not clear at all, necessarily, but perceptible and felt to be a powerful feature of human life. When Raleigh opines that he would need “another bundle of *Decades*” to describe the “manners, laws, and customs” of the natives of Guiana and their “several religions,”⁷⁷ when More imagines how human nature might be radically shaped by the social arrangement, when Harriot writes of the Algonquians’ customs and manners in the same form as his observations of the natural world, when Montaigne writes about how things might look from the perspective of the Inca or Tupinambá or even Julius Caesar, had he been transported to another world, when Locke proposes that nothing written on the blank slate of the mind is innate or anchors his philosophy to the point of meeting between “a Swiss and an Indian, in the woods of America,” they are thinking deeply about a conception of human life that can only be called culture. And, of course, very few people then or now have seen more clearly than Shakespeare how humans are suspended in webs of their own significance.

This mode of thinking about culture is, among other things, an expression of Renaissance humanism as it developed in Italy and spread throughout Europe. Chapter 1, “The Atavistic Renaissance: Italian Humanism’s Other Antiquities” finds the primitivist interrogation of a crux between nature and culture to be near the heart of the humanist project, appearing in thinkers and artists throughout the Renaissance as they reimagined their relationship to various notions of antiquity. It examines a wide array of figures throughout Renaissance Italy from Niccolò Machiavelli to Marsilio Ficino, Leonardo Bruni to Polydore Vergil, and artists such as Piero di Cosmo and Leonardo da Vinci, all of whose works are deeply invested in a primitive past that is

⁷⁷ Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of Guiana: With Related Documents*, ed. Benjamin Schmidt (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 107, 106; Montaigne, “Of Coaches,” 694.

related both to their atavistic attraction to antiquity and to their sense of culture. Humanists drew on their revered Cicero, who told of early humans banding together in civil society in order to protect property, on Vitruvius, on Lucretius, on Ovid, all of whom probed through primitivist stories the circumstances, degree, and character of humanity's separation from nature. While the humanists borrowed much from classical authors, their concerted engagement with societies fixed unavoidably in the remote past, operating under very different circumstances, endowed their reflections on the earliest human societies with a sense of culture as a situated thing. This sense was a result of humanistic investigation itself, for the tools of the *studia humanitatis* sharpened their attention to the located character of the civilization they loved—located in history, but also within all manner of context, from religion to technology to art. Most of all the past was situated (and reachable) by language. The hoped-for resurrection of their culture was to be accomplished by philology, by rhetoric, by poetry—by attending to the precise grammar and usage of the ancients' Greek and Latin, by constructing perspective as they did and learning to see the world from within it. The sense of historical anachronism that Erwin Panofsky established as essential to the Renaissance, the novel awareness that the past was different and separate from the present, is crucial to this perception of culture as variable, contingent, and fashioned like art.

The humanistic project as a whole, then, went hand in hand with a developing sense of primitivism. Dissatisfied with the character of their modernity, what humanists sought in the past were origins that could inspire renewal in their own time. One of the things they found was a novel understanding of the deepest origins of humanity, the primitivist accounts by which authors like Cicero, Vitruvius, Lucretius, and Ovid anchored their varied conceptions of the way things really are. And so the Renaissance was drawn not only to a monolithic classical antiquity

but rather toward a tangle of alternate antiquities: toward more primitive pasts in which the arts of rhetoric, architecture, power, and poetry reveal their origins and take on great significance; toward different versions of these states of nature, which promised harmony, chaos, health, and violence, and which sometimes produced friction with the established origins of Christian scripture; outward toward Egypt and further east, where it was imagined that even more ancient wisdom could be gleaned, or to the diverse ethnographic examples of other peoples to be found in Pliny, Tacitus, and Herodotus that reshaped their picture of the globe and the people in it.

But what truly re-shaped their world was the discovery of another one. Not even the illustrious ancients had known of the vast continent across the Atlantic, and that fact about the limits of human knowledge helped to shape a newfound sense of the variability—and mutability—of humans under the influence of a human-made culture. One of the first texts to take in the full scope of this shocking development was not a work of observed ethnography, but Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Chapter 2, "The New Island of Utopia" explores how New World ethnography was grafted onto the historical speculations and conception of culture produced by Renaissance humanism. More gathers together many of the most significant ideas of the humanist tradition explored in the previous chapter, from the centrality of the "primitive" as a crux between nature and culture to the understanding of culture as situated in worlds constructed by human art, and teases out their possibilities in the novel form of New World ethnography.

Ethnography, More understood, both expanded the horizons and tested the limits of what could be imagined about the infinitely variable ways of life existing in the world. The challenge of the New World and the shocking difference of its cultures provokes at once an acute sense of the limits of the mind (the whole continent was unknown to Europeans just decades before) and of its wide reach (one can, in fact, imagine ways of life radically different from one's own). The

result is a pervasive sense of absurdity, for the role of culture in human life is revealed to be at once absolutely tenacious and almost entirely arbitrary. *Utopia* captures this sense of absurdity in its unexpected inversions and the slipperiness of its language. By constructing a dialogue as an expression of humanist ideas about the human construction of culture and culture's construction of humans, and by then turning around and undercutting the dialogue form with a pretended ethnography of a "real" world, More creates a sense of culture that involves an endless loop between reality and imagination. Ethnography supersedes conjecture by describing the real at first hand, revealing the limits of human knowledge, but is itself governed by imagination; imagined societies are dismissed as daydreams, but provide the impetus to see real societies as fictions too.

The view of culture glimpsed by More in the beginnings of New World writing is paid off in Raleigh's true ethnography, *The Discovery of Guiana* (1596). Chapter 3, "'A Guiana idol of Gold': Raleigh in America," continues to examine English literature's engagement with the New World by way of Raleigh's colonial expedition to South America, situating it among other early ethnographic writing by Richard Eden and Thomas Harriot and the wider colonial economy of the sixteenth-century Atlantic. In examining the effect of Raleigh's ethnography of native cultures on his broader perception of the economic forces transforming his world, this chapter emphasize Raleigh's traffic with the real: the world around him, including the natives of Guiana as people rather than figments of discourse, and the historical situation as it was shaped by the great economic upheavals of the early modern Atlantic. He offers an exceptionally perceptive account of the economic reality set off by the plunder of New World gold and the creation of a global, capitalist market economy, the significance and scale of which he partly grasped and partly did not. Raleigh's account registers an early sense that the modernity formed by the Early

Modern Atlantic was a Faustian bargain whose consequences constitute our world of unfathomable wealth and technological power coexisting with a legacy of immeasurable human and ecological destruction.

The final chapter, “Shakespeare’s White Gods,” finds in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history of cultural encounter and colonial exploitation the radical possibility of cultural relativism. When Caliban first meets Stefano in *The Tempest*, he mistakes him for a god. This chapter examines the oft-repeated scene in which Indigenous people receive Europeans as gods as it proliferated throughout ethnography and literature in the sixteenth century. Alongside *The Tempest*, I consider early modern ethnographic accounts from both Indigenous and European perspectives, including a Lenape oral history of the arrival of Hudson in Manhattan, native and European accounts of the fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires, Montaigne’s New World reflections, particularly “Of Coaches,” and join them to literary accounts of the deified emperor in Rome in Shakespeare and Marlowe. I argue that the myth is not simply coercive, but a complex response to an extreme form of cultural difference that stretched the limits of intelligibility on both sides of the encounter; the scene can, and often does, create the possibility for understanding others as inhabiting cultures as full and real as one’s own. Moreover, the role of native cosmological belief in interpreting these encounters may thus be seen (by us as for at least some at the time) as significantly more than an expression of the discursive tricks of Europeans. By attending at length to several Indigenous accounts, the chapter examines some of the ways in which the Lenape, Aztecs, and Inca attempted to find meaning in their experiences of encounter from within their cultures. These Indigenous cultures become entangled with European cultures in complex ways beyond what has typically been recognized. In the literary expressions that take on the issues of human divinity and cultural difference, from *The Tempest*

to *Tamburlaine* to Shakespeare's Roman plays, the relative fabric of culture is recognized, with great shock, as one's own. The dissertation thus returns to the way the Renaissance relationship to antiquity was enmeshed in their ways of imagining themselves in a global world made up of many cultures. *The Tempest*, I find, emerges alongside Montaigne and early ethnography as crucial to the development of a modern understanding of human culture, a skeptical, cultural relativist account that springs from the misapprehensions of New World encounters.

Conclusion

What is most valuable in the conception of culture that I have attempted to explicate in the following chapters is the view that cultures other than one's own are worth thinking deeply about, that such thinking can and should unsettle one from one's settled assumptions, that we only see from perspectives of our own making. There is an important analogy—and more than an analogy, a genealogy—in the humanistic-ethnographic-literary apprehension of culture that took shape in the Renaissance and the humanistic study of past cultures in which this study engages.⁷⁸ Modern readers as well as the subjects of these chapters look to remote cultures for similar reasons: not to confirm our own views, nor to find out “what actually happened,” necessarily, but to better think through the meaning of things. Marshall Sahlins writes, “what actually happens in a given situation is always constituted by cultural significations that transcend the parameters of the happening itself: Bobby Thomson didn't simply hit the ball over the left-field fence, he won the pennant. The better part of history is atemporal and cultural: not ‘what actually happened,’

⁷⁸ The continuity between the “ethnological imagination” of earlier eras and the critical stance of modern scholarship is articulated in Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

but what it is that happened.”⁷⁹ If we view the project of the humanities this way, a habitual relativism of perspective is not merely useful but is a basic requirement.

Literature is, in my view, uniquely situated to do the vital work of cultural relativism. Its position comes not from some kind of exclusive disciplinary supremacy, nor from its claim on certain powerful works and authors, but from its premise that life lived from within limited perspectives—that is, from within culture and individual experience—should involve an eclectic engagement with many ways of knowing the world. These ways of knowing come from other disciplines, from other cultures, from new experiences of one’s own. The problem of “Renaissance Primitivism,” the interweaving of Western humanities with painful colonial histories, is one that will not—should not—go away. Recognizing the depth of the problem involves a committed sensitivity both to the horrors of colonial history and to the beauty and power to be found in the human cultural heritage, understood in the widest sense.

But that is what literary study can offer. We view things, inescapably, from both within and without, never entirely untethered from culture while at the same time never entirely synonymous with or determined by it. To be “inside” as well as “outside” is to be capable of contesting, changing, and even removing oneself. The forces that once claimed the study of the humanities for the supremacy of European empire have, at least for the moment, all but abandoned the field. That is not to say they have become powerless. (As I write this several state legislatures across the United States have passed laws banning the teaching of Critical Race Theory, while the more insidious attempts to starve the humanities of funding at every level continue apace.) There remain loud and persistent voices hawking allegiance to a hollow

⁷⁹ Sahlins and Graeber, 17.

“Western Civilization,” and with it an impoverished vision of “inside” and “outside.” But the situation could be worse. The stories that make up the entire vast cultural heritage of humanity are there for the telling. To concede to those forces the idea of perpetual war between inside and outside seems, to be blunt, bad politics, or at least counterproductive to the aims that most humanistic scholars profess to share. Worse than that, it sells short the mysterious, transportive, illuminating thinking that has been done in all times and places that we know of, no matter the cultural conditions under which that thinking has been done. It hinders our own ability to think from within perspectives that have been no less constructed, and it constricts the range of motion by which new perspectives—which are surprisingly flexible things, after all—are created.

The authors in the following chapters return again and again to the question of culture because it is, like fiction, a site of convergence between the imagined and the real. If we are interested in the same thing, the relativist approach seems to me to offer the best chance at coming to better understandings of what is good, true, and likely to work. We do not really grasp the forces of capitalism and colonialism, for instance, unless we appreciate with as much complexity as we can muster the deeply cultural, human reasons those histories unfolded as they did. Nor do we stand much of a chance of steering away from the real and imminent rocks they have unearthed without this sort of recognition. The problems we face are problems of our own making. If we are to get out from under them, we had better understand as fully as possible how humans go about creating things. Literary study is well-positioned to appreciate this full picture, by looking with care at the experience of culture in all its particularity and subjective complexity and by using these perceptions to imagine expansive vistas and long timescales, to form for ourselves patterns that cannot be seen from the ground.

The Atavistic Renaissance: Italian Humanism's Other Antiquities

Petrarch hated the world he lived in, loved the world of the distant past. This desire for intimacy with a distant culture, along with the sense of a deep chasm between this cultural past and the present, was the basic intellectual and aesthetic gesture of the Renaissance. It gave structure to nearly every form of expression belonging to this period of cultural foment, and sparked the revolutions in historical, artistic, and literary practice that spread from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy to Northern Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, and the British Isles. Petrarch's thorough despair at the present was not always shared, of course: just as often a characteristic optimism (with which such despair is usually bound up) predominated as the project of resurrecting the lost age took form. But the defining intellectual crux of Renaissance thought, the sense of historical anachronism along with the awareness of contingency and detachment it produced, is common to all thinkers touched by the prevailing intellectual currents brought on by Petrarch's sense of the past.¹

¹ Petrarch's story of the "Dark Ages" is fundamental to the wider sensitivity of anachronism that took hold. Inverting the conventional metaphor of a long age of pagan darkness being brought into the light of Christianity, Petrarch introduced a periodized historiography in which pre-Christian antiquity was the true age of light obscured by the subsequent "Dark Ages," which stretched to the fourteenth-century present. Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo gave the concept more specific historical shape in their fifteenth-century histories, defining the tripartite periodization that proclaimed the present to be an age of conscious return to the lost golden age. The classic account of the emergence of a new historical consciousness in the thought of Petrarch is Theodor E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages,'" *Speculum* 17 (1942): 226–42. On Petrarch, see also Charles Trinkaus, *The Poet as Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979) and Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). On the wider Renaissance conception of the past, see Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969). On the Renaissance writing of history, see Gary Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Nancy S. Struver, *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970, rpt. 2015).

To the humanists who articulated their project and to the nineteenth-century scholars who established the Renaissance as an object of study, this estranged yearning for the past was paramount. When Jacob Burckhardt wrote *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), he meant by *Cultur* what is best translated, as it usually is, as “civilization”: the total way of life of a society as measured along a developmental scale and marked by its willed achievements, especially the arts. This “culture” is the opposite of “barbarism,” as “civility” is to “savagery” and “modern” is to “primitive”; it is a refined state that must be cultivated.² What had made possible the achievements of the Renaissance, to Burckhardt and others, was its engagement in this same sort of civilizational project: they found in classical antiquity the apex of human society and sought to cultivate it in their own. Thus the humanists’ love of antiquity is almost invariably taken to be the desire for the highest expression of civilization. Just as important, I will argue, was the coincident desire for no civilization at all. What the writers and artists of the Renaissance found in searching the past for origins, in constructing through humanistic study the perspective of a far-distant culture, was the immense imaginative fertility of the crux between “nature” and “culture,” a primitive state poised between a way of life devoid of human art and a way of life almost entirely fashioned by humans.

If the Renaissance marks for Western Europe a lurch into the modern world, it is only out of a peculiar and powerful atavistic impulse. I use the term “atavistic”—the reemergence of ancestral traits—to describe the drive to discover and embody the experience of life imagined to

² Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch* (Basel: Schweighauser, 1860). Raymond Williams identifies this idea of culture especially with nineteenth-century Germany, where “Its main use was still as a synonym for *civilization*: first in the abstract sense of a general process of becoming ‘civilized’ or ‘cultivated’; second, in the sense which had already been established for *civilization* by the historians of the Enlightenment, in the popular C18 form of the universal histories, as a description of the secular process of human development.” Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 78.

exist at a privileged origin, located in the remote past and now corrupted, far diminished, or lost. The evolutionary connotation accords with the character of this thought, so often governed by nascent evolutionary frameworks for imagining the early history of humans and human society, humans' relationship to an original substructure of "nature," the historical ebbs and flows of civilizations, and the role of culture—what humanists usually called the "beliefs, practices, customs, and manners" of societies—in shaping that history. The term foregrounds Renaissance culture's obsession with origins, the invigorated sense that the deep roots of things have a particularly valuable explanatory power. The atavistic impulse is most apparent in the Renaissance reception of certain authoritative versions of the earliest stages of humanity: Vitruvius, Cicero, Lucretius, and "The Poets," whose typical representative is Ovid.

The atavistic Renaissance outlined in this chapter will share several features familiar from the one established by Burckhardt and developed by subsequent generations. It will explore the Vitruvian connection to several mainstays of Renaissance art, from Piero di Cosimo to Sandro Botticelli to Leonardo da Vinci; the Ciceronian connection to civic humanism, the "dignity of man" genre, and Neoplatonic syncretism; the Lucretian connection to Machiavelli's realist conception of politics; and "The Poets'" place in the humanist valorization of rhetoric. Each of these familiar topics is given shape by the sense of historical anachronism with which many Renaissance humanists became preoccupied: the core epoch-making realization that the past is more distant and strange than had been assumed.³ As Erich Auerbach writes,

³ There is a wide literature that deals with Renaissance anachronism, but classic discussions include Erwin Panofsky, "The First Page of Vasari's Libro" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, rpt. 1982) and Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), Myron Gilmore, "The Renaissance Conception of the Lessons of History," in *Facets of the Renaissance*, ed. William H. Werkmeister (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), and Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*. see also Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970). Zachary

With the first dawn of humanism, there began to be a sense that the events of classical history and legend and also those of the Bible were not separated from the present simply by an extent of time but also by completely different conditions of life. Humanism with its program of renewal of antique forms of life and expression creates a historical perspective in depth such as no previous epoch known to us possessed.⁴

A new awareness of one's ineluctable situation in history, in the wider totality of culture, moreover, helped to push Renaissance inquiry toward the focus on the human-centered world characteristic of the Burckhardian understanding of the age as one, in Richard Strier's words, "in which it was possible to regard enjoyment of the things of this world as something not clearly negative and even, at times, as praiseworthy."⁵

But attending carefully to the historical and cultural relativism produced by the sense of anachronism leads rather toward an awareness of the strange, unstable multiplicity of antiquities that haunted different corners of the Renaissance project than to the image of confident perfectibility and high civility that has so often held sway. Antiquity—because of its antiquity, because of its pronounced cultural differences—was king, and its remote historical distance was at the source of its allure.

What, then, was antiquity to the Renaissance? One aim of this chapter is to shift the range of meanings the concept held in Renaissance culture toward a broader, more various, and less

Sayre Schiffman, "Jean Bodin, Roman Law, and the Renaissance Conception of the Past," in *Cultural Visions: Essays in the History of Culture*, ed. Penny Schine Gold and Benjamin C. Sax, (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2000), 271–87. For a recent complication of this argument, see Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York : Zone Books, 2010).

⁴ Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946, rpt. 2013), 321. See also Charles Edward Trinkaus, *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 397 note 6: "Thus the Renaissance emphasis on *humanitas* as a product of custom and education, rather than nature, introduced an explicit relativism into the universalism received from antiquity."

⁵ Richard Strier, *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.

settled notion of antiquity than is usually imagined. For when humanists and those influenced by humanism looked to the past they saw a tangle of antiquities that competed, overlapped, and recombined within their own accounts of humanity's relationship to its past. Ancient Rome could mean the Romans who are "us" as well as the Romans who are tantalizingly yet unmistakably different. "Rome the sublime Empress of the world," the setting for a fantastic dream vision narrated in the monk and amateur architectural enthusiast Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), is rather a landscape of multiplicity in which Poliphilo—the lover of all things—encounters mysterious and fabulous ruins from around the world, including

The many ancient things expressed in Nilotic signs.
Here are pyramids, baths and vast colossi,
And the ancient form of obelisks appears.
 . . . and the whole
Of human life is expressed in dark labyrinths.⁶

In Poliphilo's dream, a huge black stone elephant has "Egyptian characters," a Latin inscription, and a sign with Ionic and Arabic letters; a magnificent obelisk is adorned with "an antique inscription in our own lettering, in Greek and in Arabic, from which I understood that it was dedicated to the sovereign Sun"; he interprets a vaguely Christian message about the "God of Nature" from some "ancient and sacred writings" in hieroglyphs; he marvels at the pagan sacrifice of a donkey to the god Priapus.⁷ His dream mirrors the experiences of antiquarians like Cyriac of Ancona, who traveled far and wide in search of physical ruins not only from Rome, but from Egypt and Constantinople, and sparked a fervor among humanists for the significance of

⁶ "Anonymous Elegy to the Reader" in Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 31, 4.

⁷ Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, 36–7, 28, 41, 194–95.

hieroglyphic writing. Pictorial representation suggested the possibility of a more natural form of language, which may reveal the truths of ever earlier antiquities.⁸

Renaissance culture was knowingly and unknowingly the result of a wider global and historical reach than has often been acknowledged. The scholarship of the past few decades has emphasized the role of Islamic and Asian cultures in the constitution of what has traditionally been seen as a bounded European development.⁹ Arabic arithmetic, medicine, and astronomy provided the basis for European knowledge while Chinese inventions long preceded ones Europeans imagined to constitute their own modernity. The New World was a source of intense curiosity, transforming entrenched local cultures and ways of thinking. Recent attempts to re-situate the Italian Renaissance into a more global world have revealed how, in Elizabeth Horodowich and Lia Markey's words, "the Renaissance occurred as a consequence of the discovery of global antiquities and cross-cultural knowledge, not just antiquities and texts from Greece and Rome."¹⁰ As this chapter will explore, even to read Greek and Roman authors was to be confronted by a wide array of antiquities different from their own, as illustrated in a chapter of Robert Albott's *Wits theater of the little world* (1599), "Of Antiquities. The knowledge of

⁸ See Anthony Grafton, "The Ancient City Restored: Archaeology, Ecclesiastical History, and Egyptology," in *Bring Out Your Dead: The Past as Revelation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 31–61. On Egypt in Renaissance Italy, see Brian Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁹ See, for example, Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Jerry Brotton and Lisa Jardine, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), Anna Contadini and Claire Norton, eds. *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), John Archer, *Old Worlds: Egypt, Southwest Asia, India, and Russia in Early Modern English Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). For an overview, see Ania Loomba, "Introduction," *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Renaissance (1450–1650)*, ed. Ania Loomba, vol. 3, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Horodowich and Lia Markey, "Italy's Virtual Discovery: An Introduction," in *The New World in Early Modern Italy, 1492–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–16, 5.

Antiquities, & the first invention of things, was so much in request among the Ancients, that Pliny, Marcus Varro, & Macrobius, (historiographers no less grave than true) were in great controversy, for proving what things were most ancient.”¹¹ The Greek and Roman inheritance reshaped their sense of the globe, too, as Pliny, Ptolemy, Herodotus, and Tacitus offered new geographical and ethnographic models for imagining culture, and thus also an expanded archive for constructing faraway pasts. Imagining the past, then, meant imagining a wider and more various world.

Humanists cited, to various purpose, Vitruvius’s account of the first human language, community, and technology; Cicero’s origin of society through rhetoric and oratory; Lucretius’s account of development from an animalistic world governed by instinct; and Ovid’s golden age, in which human concordance with nature is corrupted by civilization. I have chosen to investigate these models to the exclusion of other possibilities, including, for instance, Plato’s myths of origin in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere. With the significant exception of the biblical history found in Genesis, they are, in my reading, the most influential and widespread versions of the earliest origins of human culture in the Renaissance. They are generally presented as plausible histories rather than mythological creation stories. And, most importantly, they share a focus on what is imagined as the crucial transitional period, from a state of nature into a condition of culture. This chapter surveys the revival and reanimation of these models—some lost, some simply given new life—through an array of thinkers and artist, and aims to give a broad sense of the ways in which these primitivist ideas diffused through Renaissance culture.

¹¹ Albott, Robert, and John Bodenham. *VVits Theater of the Little World* (London: Printed by James Roberts for Nicholas Ling, 1599), Early English Books Online.

There is no consistent vision in this primitivism; instead, the effect is one of confusion and collage, a catalyzing idea marshaled toward diverse yet provocative ends.

Vitruvius

Unlike much of the Renaissance's Greco-Roman inheritance, Vitruvius's *De architectura* had not been lost. Yet it was so inconsequential before the fifteenth century that it has often been claimed that Poggio Bracciolini rediscovered the texts in 1416. Only then, and later with the publication of several Italian commentaries in the early sixteenth century, did the Roman author become an authority on architecture.¹² One feature of the text that consistently drew the interest of Renaissance commentators was the primitivist origin story of architecture. In Book II, Vitruvius provides an etiology of architectural development beginning from a historical state of nature, entwining the first stages of building with the development of culture:

Humans, by their most ancient custom, were born like beasts in the woods, and caves, and groves, and eked out their lives by feeding on rough fodder. During that time, in a certain place, dense, close-growing trees, stirred by stormy winds and rubbing their branches against one another, took fire. Terrified by the flames, those who were in the vicinity fled. Later, however, approaching more closely, when they discovered that the heat of fire was a great advantage to the body, they threw logs into it and preserving it by this means they summoned others, showing what benefits they had from this thing by means of gestures. In this gathering of people, as they poured forth their breath in varying voices, they established words by happening upon them in their daily routines. Later, by signifying things with more frequent practice, they began by chance occurrence to speak sentences and thus produced conversations among themselves.

The beginning of association among human beings, their meeting and living together, thus came into being because of the discovery of fire. When many people came into a single place, having, beyond all the other animals, this gift of

¹² For the fifteenth- and early-sixteenth century reception, spread, and influence of the text in Italy, see Georgia Clarke, "Vitruvian Paradigms," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 70 (2002): 319–46, Tod A. Marder, "Vitruvius and the Architectural Treatise in Early Modern Europe," in *The Companion to the History of Architecture*, vol. 1, ed. Alina Payne, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1–31, and Ingrid D. Rowland, "Vitruvius and His Sixteenth-Century Readers, in Latin and Vernacular," in *Dynamics of Neo-Latin and the Vernacular*, 2014), 288–301.

nature: that they walked, not prone, but upright, they therefore could look upon the magnificence of the universe and the stars. For the same reason they were able to manipulate whatever object they wished, using their hands and other limbs. Some in the group began to make coverings of leaves, others to dig caves under the mountains. Many imitated the nest building of swallows and created places of mud and twigs where they might take cover. Then, observing each other's homes and adding new ideas to their own, they created better types of houses as the days went by.¹³

Vitruvius's interest is not simply in the rise of building technology, but in building as a marker of culture, part of a process that includes eating cooked rather than raw food, contemplating the universe, and the mimetic manipulation of objects. The most important technology is language, with which all manner of social innovation is possible. But language originates in a fluke of nature: a storm sparks a fire in the woods, and humans take part in the rudimentary organization needed to manage the phenomenon by adding wood; likewise, by "chance occurrence" they manage words as they "happen upon them," building from words to sentences to conversation that becomes a shared language. Human acuity of mind and body are both crucial in this process, for the earliest shelters required not only social cooperation, but also the perception and artistic skill to imitate swallows' nests and other natural forms. The wide dispersal of this story through Renaissance culture reveals the potency of the narrative for the fields of art, architecture, history, rhetoric, and literature as they engaged in the same primitivist project.

Petrarch had a copy of *De architectura* in his library, and copies proliferated throughout Italy during the fifteenth century, gaining recognition as the most important ancient source of architectural knowledge and inspiring Leon Battista Alberti's imitative *De re aedificatoria*

¹³ Vitruvius Pollio, *Vitruvius: Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Ingrid D. Rowland, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

around mid-century.¹⁴ Vitruvius's vision of the origins of human society and building spread with it. In an architectural treatise written by Filarete in the 1460s, we see an attempt to reconcile the Vitruvian origin story with Christian history. Citing Vitruvius and his account of "those first men who lived in the forests and made themselves huts and grottoes as best they could," he writes, of the origins of building,

It is to be believed that when Adam was driven out of Paradise, it was raining. . . . When he recognized and understood his need [for shelter], we can believe that he made some sort of shelter of branches, or a hut, or perhaps some cave where he could flee when he needed. If such were the case, it is probable that Adam was the first.

You could say, but how could he make this shelter since he did not yet have iron? . . . Just as he instinctively put his hands over his head, so was he able to break branches and in the same way cut them in pieces bit by bit and then stick them into the earth and make a shelter. . . . However it was, I believe that Adam was the first for the reasons named above. Whoever it was, it is certain that the first origins derived from the necessity for survival.¹⁵

Less detailed than Vitruvius's account, Filarete's version foregrounds the image of branches brought together into a primitive hut, stemming from an instinctual need for survival in the natural elements. The image takes priority even over the question of *who* first did it, thus allowing an element of uncertainty—"However it was . . . Whoever it was"—to paper over any competing details that might arise between the pagan and Christian accounts. Landing on this fount of authority in Vitruvius, Filarete registers and attempts to resolve a tension between what he reads and what he believes. Giovanni Boccaccio seems to have felt the same when telling Vitruvius's story in his *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, noting that "that very talented man had

¹⁴ Rowland, "Vitruvius and His Sixteenth-Century Readers, in Latin and Vernacular."

¹⁵ Filarete, *Filarete's Treatise on Architecture: Being the Treatise by Antonio di Piero Averlino, Known as Filarete*, ed. and trans. John R. Spencer, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965), 10.

not read the Pentateuch. Near the beginning of that he would have read of a very different creator of language, Adam, who named everything.”¹⁶

Filarete’s image of the primitive hut is an important one in the Renaissance reception of Vitruvius’s account of origins, for *De architectura* was uniquely influential in the visual arts.¹⁷ According to Stephanie Moser, “The Vitruvian imagery had an important impact on the iconography of prehistory, not only in the sense that it was the earliest imagery devoted to the subject of prehistory, but also because it provided such a contrast to the previous paradisaical imagery of the past.”¹⁸ She refers to the popular and much-imitated illustrated copies of *De architectura* printed in 1511 by the humanist scholar and architect Fra Giocondo and by the architect Cesare Cesariano 1521.¹⁹ The first introduces several elements common to early modern representations of prehistory, as a group of people clothed in animal skins socialize around a fire in the woods, while a walled town in the background indicates the historical transition between life in the forest and life in settled communities. In the 1521 edition, the two scenes are more clearly situated in Vitruvius’s vignette. The first depicts the transitional moment in which some humans flee the forest fire, and others in the foreground learn to manage

¹⁶ Qtd. in Anthony Grafton, “The Ravishing Painting of Piero di Cosimo,” *New York Review of Books* (May 7, 2015). See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, ed. and trans. Jon Solomon, Volume 1: Books I–V (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ For the iconographic reception of Vitruvius’s story about fire, see Olga Medvedkova, “In the Beginning, There was Fire: Vitruvius and the Origin of the City,” trans. Philippe Malgouyres, in *Wounded Cities: The Representation of Urban Disasters in European Art (14th–20th Centuries)*, eds. Marco Folin and Monica Preti, (Leiden : Brill, 2015), 75–99.

¹⁸ For more on the iconography of primitivism, see Stephanie Moser, *Ancestral Images: The Iconography of Human Origins* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) for a broad survey and Carlo Ginzburg, “Memory and Distance: Learning from a Gilded Silver Vase (Antwerp, C. 1530),” *Diogenes*, English Ed., 51, no. 1 (2004): 99–112 for a particularly interesting case.

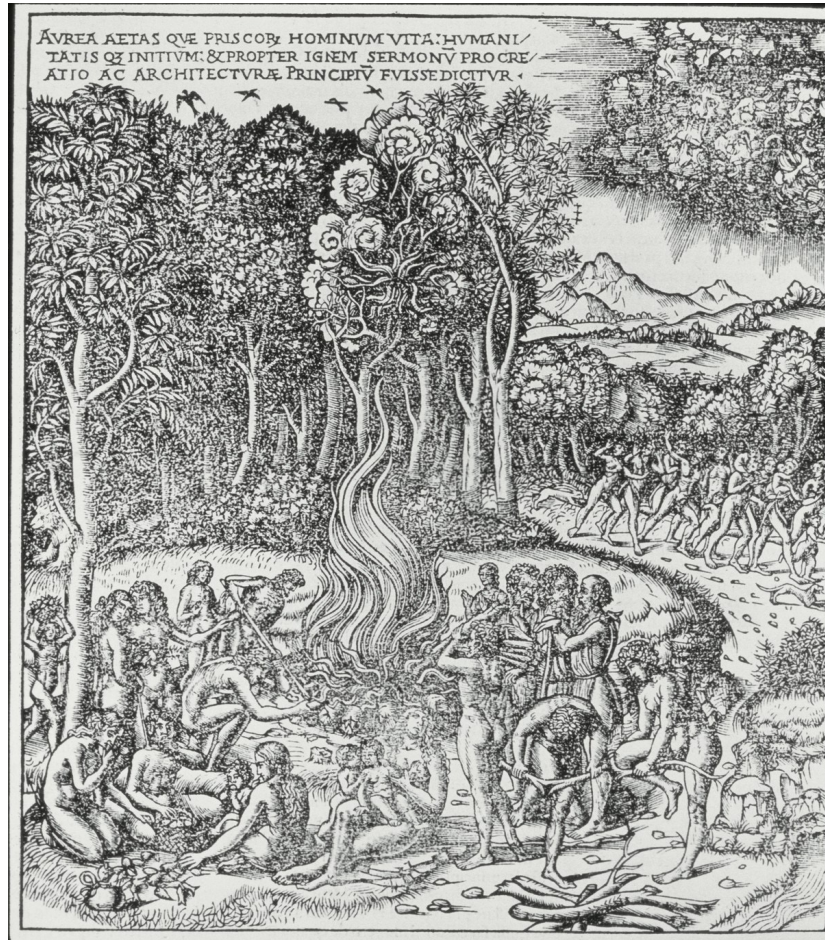
¹⁹ See also Ingrid Rowland, “The Fra Giocondo Vitruvius at 500 (1511–2011),” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 3 (2011): 285–89.

it, taking part in other social activities as they stoke the fire and break branches to keep it going. The following image continues the Vitruvian story, showing the communal construction of a hut out of the same broken branches and forked trees as described in Vitruvius as well as a cave being dug out with simple stone tools.



Fra Giocondo, *M. Vitruvius per iocundum solito castigatior factus cum figuris . . .*,
Venice: Iohannes Tacuinus, 1511.²⁰

²⁰ Image from Olga Medvedkova, “In the Beginning, There was Fire,” 85.



Cesare Cesariano, *Designs After Vitruvius*, 1521, Harvard Fine Arts Library, 1987.



Cesare Cesariano, in Vitruvius Pollio, *De architectura libri dece*, trans. Cesare Cesariano, (Como: G. da Pöte, 1521), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. xxxii.

Cesariano provided a comment on this engraving that explicitly connects the primeval scene with the “new populations” (*novi populi*) discovered by Spain and Portugal.²¹ Some have suggested that in these engravings Cesariano was attempting to apply some of the ideas of his teacher, Leonardo da Vinci.²² The theme is fully realized here here not simply because it follows the text, but because the Vitruvian influence was circulating in the air, particularly in the early sixteenth century.

The Vitruvian-inspired iconography of the origins of society in Renaissance art goes much deeper than the direct illustration of his text, as the human subject came more clearly into

²¹ See Ginzburg, “Memory and Distance,” 100.

²² Ginzburg, “Memory and Distance,” 106.

view and the depiction of “nature” took on increasing significance.²³ An illustrative—if idiosyncratic—case can be found in the paintings of Piero di Cosimo, also working in Florence at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In Erwin Panofsky’s account, Piero displays an “extraordinary preoccupation with the circumstances and emotions of primordial existence [that] is practically ubiquitous in his paintings, regardless of subject, patron, and destination.”²⁴

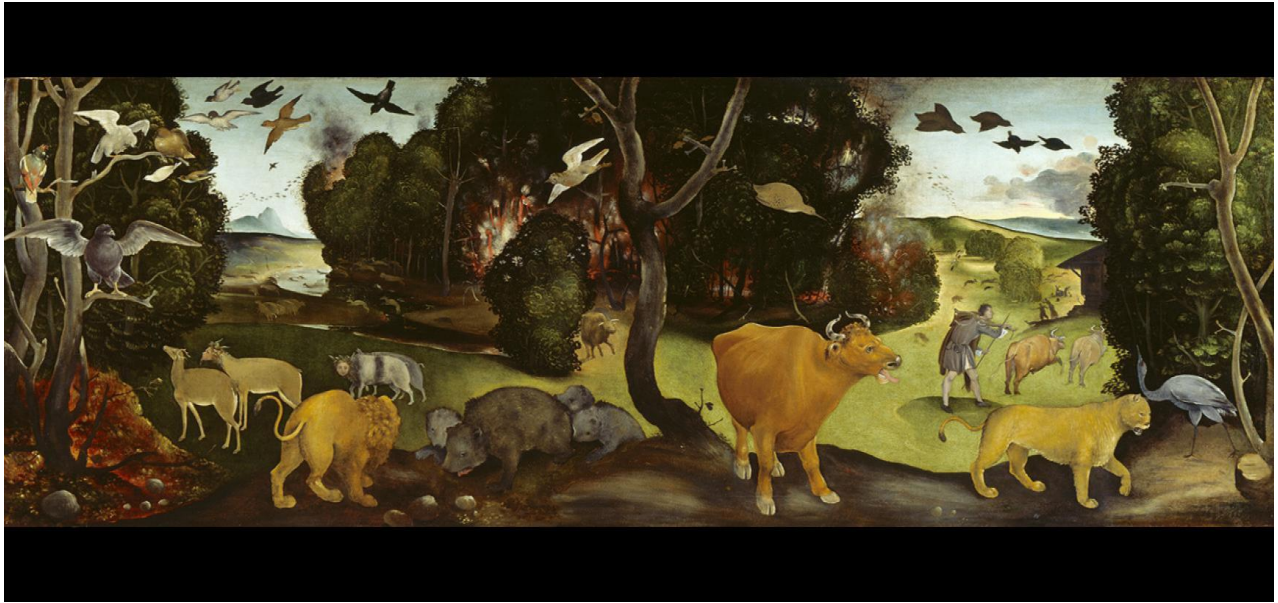
Panofsky has identified the significant influence of Vitruvius’s and Lucretius’s similar versions of the early history of humanity in several of his paintings, which he argues form a cycle representing different scenes from the early development of human civilization: *The Finding of Vulcan on Lemnos*, *the Return of New Life to Lemnos*, *The Hunt*, *the Return from the Hunt*, and *The Forest Fire*.²⁵ These depict a composite of primitivist elements from the role of the god Vulcan in providing the spark of ingenuity that led to the first buildings, to the imaginative

²³ See, for example, Karen Hope Goodchild, April Oettinger and Leopoldine Prosperetti, eds., *Green Worlds in Early Modern Italy*. *Green Worlds in Early Modern Italy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

²⁴ Erwin Panofsky, “The Early History of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero Di Cosimo,” in *Studies In Iconology: Humanistic Themes In The Art Of The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 58.

²⁵ In his seminal essay, “The Early History of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo,” Panofsky accounts for the repeated image of the forest fire by placing it within a network of primitivist classical sources: “The persistent recurrence of this motif [the forest fire] cannot be accounted for by mere pictorial fancy. It is, most evidently, an iconographical attribute rather than a whimsical conceit, for it is identical with the famous forest fire which had haunted the imaginations of Lucretius, Diodorus Siculus, Pliny, Vitruvius, and Boccaccio. We remember that it appeared regularly in all the illustrations of Vitruvius, and in the Renaissance it was as characteristic of representations of the Stone Age as the tower was of images of St. Barbara.” Panofsky, 53. For Renaissance images of fire as a mark of early civilization, see Medvedkova, “In the Beginning, There was Fire: Vitruvius and the Origin of the City.” Accounts of Piero that follow in Panofsky’s footsteps include Dennis Geronimus, *Piero Di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), esp. chapter 4, “Of Man and Chimeras: A Return to the Primitive,” 123–61, and Dennis Geronimus, “No Man’s Lands: Lucretius and the Primitive Strain in Piero’s Art and Patronage,” in *Piero Di Cosimo: The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence*, ed. G. A. Hirschauer and Dennis Geronimus, (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2015), 48–69.

representation of primitive boats constructed from barely-hewn trees and adorned with skulls. *The Forest Fire*, in particular, draws on the idea of a primordial forest fire associated with the Vitruvian story, linking it thematically with *The Hunt* and the *Return from the Hunt* in which the Vitruvian-Lucretian fire is also visible.



Piero di Cosimo, *The Forest Fire*. c.1505, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

A raging fire comes from within the forest at the center of the composition, scattering an array of animals. The scene is populated almost entirely with non-human nature—animals of all sorts (eighteen different species),²⁶ the forest, a vast landscape, even two strange human-animal hybrids—though a man in rustic garb, herding animals toward his hut is overshadowed by the ox in the foreground. Piero’s paintings are also influenced by the Lucretian account of prehistory, which focuses on the conditions of the pre-cultural state of nature; similar accounts can be found

²⁶ Geronimus, “No Man’s Lands,” 53.

in Pliny and Diodorus Siculus, and scholars have proposed a number of classical connections to the evolutionary theme in these paintings.²⁷ (We will return to the influence of Lucretius, but it is important to note the way these stories often form a network of source material that could be drawn on indiscriminately, as the occasion required.) Piero's sensitivity to the extreme distance of the past as evoked by ancient texts led Charles Trinkaus to claim that Piero "came closest to expressing the ideas of those humanists who were conscious of the historical role of their tradition," to which Dennis Geronimus adds that "Piero's 'ancient' was of an entirely different order, closer to the Pleistocene era than to that of Caesar."²⁸

The Fra Giocondo and Cesariano woodcuts are directly linked with the Vitruvian account of prehistory, and Piero's representations of the theme are peculiar among his contemporaries, but the primitivist strain of Renaissance art extends beyond these instances of direct representation. As Joseph Rykwert has comprehensively shown, these instances are part of a much wider Renaissance preoccupation with the image of the primitive hut and the account of the evolutionary origins of architecture.²⁹ Simple structures supported by forked tree trunks and branches in place of columns, rough-hewn or not hewn at all, appear with uncanny frequency as a motif in Renaissance art evoking versions of antiquity and origin. Nativity and adoration paintings tend to intimate the rebirth and reordering of the world, and thus often signify these ruptures with architectural elements that mark the beginnings of human history. Sandro

²⁷ Geronimus, "Of Man and Chimeras: A Return to the Primitive," in *Piero Di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

²⁸ Geronimus, "Of Man and Chimeras: A Return to the Primitive," 123.

²⁹ Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981).

Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1475), one of the apexes of the genre, typifies the way antiquities overlay each other in these paintings.



Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi* c. 1475-6, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Mary sits in a structure that is part ruined stone building, part cave, and part primitive hut. The ruins of a building with high Roman arches supported by columns in the background is almost continuous with the wooden columns of the structure in the foreground. These supports, however, are simple trees that have been hardly modified, if at all—indeed, they seem to be growing *in situ*, the bark still covering the trunks. As in many such examples, the primacy of the simple, elemental structure over the crumbling splendor of Imperial Rome is mirrored by the the crowds of richly adorned and usually exotic visitors—here including Botticelli's Medici

patrons—who tend to provide much of the visual appeal of these paintings, kneeling before a lowly mother and child.³⁰

The use of architectural elements—typically a combination of crumbling Roman architecture and the wooden primitive hut—to signify the inauguration of a new era, and the complex uses of temporality in Renaissance painting more generally, have been analyzed by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood. They write,

In fifteenth-century Europe the primitive hut, the degree zero of architecture, became a focus of pictorial representation as never before, and these projections fed back into architectural practice. The wrinkled temporality of the Nativity scenes, with archaic sheds sprouting out of the advanced architecture, is a dream-like, anachronic configuration. The primitive hut and the grand architecture of the ancients do not simply occupy two distant moments on a timeline; they are mutually necessary fantasies, knitted together repeatedly in the projections of Renaissance art and architecture.³¹

The primitive hut, they contend, showed the ancient bones beneath the skin of modern architecture. But it was an ambivalent symbol. While it could “stabilize the idea of an origin point and . . . reaffirm that the new constructions, despite their apparent novelty, retained ancient identities,” the image of the hut, especially among more advanced architecture, “measured out the gap between the simplicity of the past and the complexity of the present.”³²

The iconography of the primitive hut is widespread, and turns out to be one of the major ways these paintings transmit the world-historical significance of what they aim to depict.

Filippino Lippi makes use of a similar composition and a number of similar motifs in his

³⁰ For further examples, including another Botticelli *Adoration* showing “architectural history . . . thrown suddenly into reverse,” see Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York : Zone Books, 2010).

³¹ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York : Zone Books, 2010), 307–8.

³² Nagel and Wood, 313.

Adoration, which also frames the central mother and child with a barely-modified shelter of tree trunks and limbs built against the ruins of a more advanced stone building.



Filippino Lippi, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1496, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

This painting was commissioned to replace Leonardo's unfinished *Adoration* in the altar of San Donato a Scopeto outside Florence, which also builds its architectural elements from the integration of trees and ruined stone structures. Leonardo's painting was left unfinished so that he could go to Milan, where he designed and painted, among other things, the *Sala delle Asse* for Ludovico Il Moro: a room that appears to be created by trees, with trunks acting as the

supporting elements and a bower of interwoven branches on the ceiling above.³³ The arboreal room suggests a perfect concordance between nature and culture, the Sforza rulers (whose crest occupies the center of the ceiling) and their magnificent buildings a perfect outgrowth of humanity's origins in wild, Vitruvian nature. It is not simply the legitimation of political power that is being claimed here, however, but also the power of art that exists at the source of other elements of culture, including politics: the architectural ingenuity and dexterity to manipulate the first building materials, the artistic ability to accomplish mimesis in painting, and the symbolic capacity that allows the meaning of these arts to be communicated.

³³ Jill Pederson argues that the *Sala delle Asse* “may be understood as a sort of intermediary realm between the cultivated and the wild, and by extension the rational and the fantastical.” Jill Pederson, “The Sala delle Asse as Locus amoenus: Revisiting Leonardo da Vinci’s Arboreal Imagery in Milan’s Castello Sforzesco,” in *Green Worlds in Early Modern Italy: Art and the Verdant Earth*, ed. Karen Hope Goodchild, April Oettinger and Leopoldine Prosperetti, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 92. See also John F. Moffitt, “Leonardo’s ‘Sala delle Asse’ and the Primordial Origin of Architecture,” *Arte Lombarda* no. 92–93 (1990): 76–90.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1481, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Sala delle Asse*, c. 1498, Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

So too were Leonardo's and others' depictions of war at the same time primal scenes of the days when humans lived "like beasts in the woods, and caves, and groves." Leonardo's notebooks contain one reference to Lucretius: "Lucretius in his third [book] *De rerum natura*: The hands, nails and teeth were the weapons of ancient man. / They also used for a standard a bunch of grass tied to a pole," and his advice on painting battle scenes describes war as fighting "tooth and nail in cruel and bitter vengeance."³⁴ The unprecedented artistic preoccupation with nature that has made Leonardo the paradigmatic Renaissance artist was bound up with his evident interest in the life of primitive humans as described by Vitruvius, Lucretius, and others.³⁵ The pursuit of perfection in Renaissance painting, essentially all of which was done at the behest of wealthy patrons who aimed to project the highest level of civility, is in these works refracted through the prism of earliest humanity, an imagined world that is far from perfect yet teeming with potential insight.

It is significant, in this vein, that the Adoration of the Magi scene was often the only conventional occasion for representing people from cultures outside Europe in Renaissance painting.³⁶ The religious theme of historical rupture and renewal is also a global event; the geographical, cultural, and racial diversity of peoples is emphasized in order to be superimposed onto the historical differences between primitive origin and modernity. Paintings by Albrecht Dürer and Andrea Mantegna provide examples of how the theme is used as an opportunity to

³⁴ Qtd. in Geronimus, "No Man's Lands," 56.

³⁵ See Marco Beretta, "Leonardo and Lucretius," *Rinascimento*, 49 (2009): 369–72.

³⁶ *Adoration* scenes, however, are not the only way Renaissance art responded to other cultures and to notions of the primitive. See Jill Burke, "Nakedness and Other Peoples: Rethinking the Italian Renaissance Nude," *Art History* 36, no. 4 (2013): 714–39.

display the splendor and opulence associated with faraway Asian and African kings and their retinues.



Albrecht Dürer, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1504, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1463-4, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Representations of the primitive past are always also about representing other cultures. The historical imagination of the humanists was, by necessity, also one attuned to natural history, to the arts, and to culture in an ethnographic sense—even if most humanists before the seventeenth century preferred the imaginative engagement with textual authorities to the observing eye. The primordial origins found in classical texts grew together with ways of imagining other cultures, as illustrated by Polydore Vergil, who shuttles between primitive antiquity and ethnography, augmenting a paraphrase of Vitruvius with examples from Strabo's *Geography* and unsourced contemporary accounts.

At first people were born in caves and forests like animals and spent their lives there feeding on what grows wild, but later, as Vitruvius *On Architecture* believes, they discovered fire. Once they recognized that its warmth was good for keeping off the fore of cold, they moved closer to it and many gathered into a single group, an assembly in which they easily managed whatever they wished because they shared a plan. Some built canopies out of foliage. Some dug caves beneath the hills, like the Troglodytes and certain Libyan peoples, who were neighbors of the western Ethiopians, according to Strabo in book 17 of the *Geography*. Others imitated swallows' nests, using clay and wattles to make dwellings that they could enter. . . . Indeed, they [such buildings] are seen today in almost every country—and no wonder, for even now there are those who live their lives beneath the sky without buildings, some in wagons, like nearly all the Scythians, and others in the open plains, like the Nomads and the Saracens in Africa, who are called wild people.³⁷

Polydore's *On Discovery*, an investigation into the historical origins of different features of culture, displays a persistent anthropological bent. The origins of customs are revealed by ethnographic observation as well as by sorting through classical authorities, acting as comparable investigations into the secrets of antiquity.³⁸

But what the paintings depict is not the analogy, so often simply assumed, that the ways of life nearer to the historical origin of human societies are observable in peoples currently inhabiting Africa, Asia, or the Americas while Europeans inhabit modernity. The matrix of associations in the *Adoration* paintings complicates and inverts expectations about the interpretability of cultural difference across time and space precisely because of the way the paintings overlay multiple imagined antiquities. From a late fifteenth-century Italian perspective, do the Roman ruins signify decadent modernity, a superceded pagan antiquity, or the humanists'

³⁷ Polydore Vergil, *On Discovery*, ed. Brian P. Copenhaver, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 409–11.

³⁸ Often the ethnographic accounts were taken from the classical authorities themselves, as with Strabo above. After Vitruvius, in fact, Pliny was the most important classical authority for Renaissance architecture. See Peter Fane-Saunders, *Pliny the Elder and the Emergence of Renaissance Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

remote yet noble classical world? Does the return of the primitive hut prompt associations with an Edenic origin, or the pre-religious, pre-social, human-centered origin of the Vitruvian imagination? Is it a nostalgic perspective, and if so toward what is the nostalgia directed? Is the human variety and pomp of the visiting Magi, which provides so much of the visual energy of these paintings, present only so that the painting may promise a dream of world unification, the erasure of difference, and the rejection of worldly vanities? In these paintings, the birth of Christ is figured as a rebirth of humanity, the recovery project of the Renaissance formed nicely to a theological stamp. Yet the gesture does not—in many of the best paintings, at least—integrate these imagined pasts into one well-oiled and unified machine. The convergence of alternate antiquities produces friction, and that friction could be captured through the skilled artist's dedicated attention to the incongruities of anachronism—that is, to the relativity of discrete historical moments and cultures.

If the friction between Christian history and the alternative antiquities arising out of immersion in the culture of Greece and Rome produced some of the light and heat of Italian Renaissance painting, it often seems to have passed by unnoticed by humanists engaged in the same cultural immersion. Coluccio Salutati, an early and energetic disciple of humanism who decisively ensured Petrarch's humanist foothold would become the wide path through which the educated elite of Florence must pass, championed and institutionalized the use of Roman and (crucially) Greek texts in the proper education of the city's powerful figures. As chancellor of the republic, he created a shared intellectual culture by normalizing the study of classical texts, and thus influenced the cultural hegemony of Florence and the spread of humanism throughout Italy. Conservative critics, such as the Dominican friar Giovanni Dominici and Cino Rinucci, took issue with this educational program, charging that by studying Varro's description of diverse

religions and other works written by ancient authors, the humanist curriculum promoted paganism and taught its young students to despise Christian texts.³⁹

But despite the revolutionary and potentially unsettling character of his reforms, Salutati himself seems unmoved from a rather unoriginal Christian perspective by the integration of classical primitivist ideas into his traditional framework. In his meditative *On the World and Religious Life*, he writes,

Let us consult nature itself, the best guide, about what we ought to take up from the world's contents: nature desires hunger to be checked, thirst to be quenched, rain and frost to be driven away, and the force of wind and heat to be kept off. Anything beyond this is bad. The earliest age has taught us just how easily these needs can be satisfied: we read that people satisfied hunger with acorns, suppressed thirst with water, drove off chills with pelts, and avoided rainstorms, winds, and heat by means of caves and hollows. This is that most innocent age; the poets extolled it with many praises and called it golden or Saturnian. Blessed acorns! Wholesome rivers! At that time the poison of sizzling food did not excite lust by its warmth; drooping drunkenness most like insanity did not assault the brain; there was no dispute with neighbor over boundaries or sovereign rule. All things were held in common. Grass served as beds, and caves—unguarded, not closely but open to all—as homes. . . .

Get rid of your desire, wretched man, lay down your riches, renounce the world, lead your life according to the precepts, try to fulfill the counsels, subject your will to the divine will—rather, you are not to subject it (for it is already subject), but to keep it subject; begin to love God, to hate the world, to love poverty, and recoil at riches.⁴⁰

If the imagination of a primitive past sometimes produced dazzling sites of inquiry, it (likely more often) was simply an occasion for stale repetition of rhetorical set-pieces, borrowing some of the authority of Vitruvius or Cicero for decoration or in service of humanist tendentiousness. Battista Guarino recommends, in his *Program of Teaching and Learning*, that young students “should read the remaining histories in order, from whom they will excerpt the customs,

³⁹ Nauert, 26–30.

⁴⁰ Coluccio Salutati, *On the World and Religious Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 179.

manners, and laws of various peoples”—the potentially dangerous practice thought by critics to engender sympathy toward paganism—but simply because “This practice is of great use in producing eloquence in daily speech.”⁴¹ Yet the idea of an original antiquity shaped humanist discourse in a variety of ways, consciously and unconsciously. It could be an occasion for optimism, for praise, for a polemic against the current state of affairs; it justified institutions of human civilization or exposed them as corruptions as the situation required. It cut against Christian modes of thinking or reinforced them, allowing Christian ideas to be expressed in different terms. The variety of intellectual models that could be deployed in thinking about the primeval past created a rich tapestry of images and ideas whose threads were followed from all directions and to many different ends.

Cicero

No figure from antiquity was as central to Renaissance humanism as Cicero, a favorite of Petrarch and ideal model for the revival of classical Latin rhetoric. His Renaissance legacy was shaped in part by his unique theory of the origins of human societies, which underpin his most influential ideas in the Renaissance, i.e., the purpose of civil society and the role of rhetoric in shaping that society.⁴² Cicero was also revered as a political thinker, and is largely responsible for what became known as civic humanism: an intellectual movement developed in quattrocento Florence in imitation of Greco-Roman models, centered on the ideal of a participatory concept of

⁴¹ Battista Guarini, “A Program of Teaching and Learning,” in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, ed. and trans. Craig Kallendorf, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 287.

⁴² See Vasileios Syros, “Founders and Kings versus Orators: Medieval and Early Modern Views on the Origins of Social Life,” *Viator* 42, no. 1 (2011): 383–408. Cary J. Nederman argues that the Ciceronian orator was also an important figure in medieval conceptions of the political community, “The Ciceronian Orator in Medieval Thought,” *Journal of Medieval History* 18 (1992): 75–95.

citizenship and valorizing a politically- and communitarian-focused *vita activa*.⁴³ Cicero's most influential contribution to the theoretical underpinnings of civic humanism is grounded in his narrative about how humans came to form societies out of a primitive, solitary existence. *De Inventione*, Cicero's treatise on rhetoric, begins with the story:

For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by the guidance of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength; there was as yet no ordered system of religious worship nor of social duties; no one had seen legitimate marriage nor had anyone looked upon children whom he knew to be his own; nor had they learned the advantages of an equitable code of law. And so through their ignorance and error blind and unreasoning passion satisfied itself by misuse of bodily strength, which is a very dangerous servant.⁴⁴

This description follows the negatively-defined state of nature found in Vitruvius, where life is defined by the absence of recognizable markers of culture. Humans are undifferentiated from animals, not guided by their inborn reason but “unreasoning passion,” reliant on strength, solitary. Nowhere does he idealize this condition, nor suggest—as others would—that following one's natural desires might lead to a kind of fulfillment inaccessible to the modern condition.

The cultivation of virtue and happiness occurs with the first steps out of this state toward organized culture: human sociability is the occasion for achieving the comforts and benefits reason makes possible, and so Cicero places his emphasis on this banding together.

At this juncture a man—great and wise I am sure— became aware of the power

⁴³ The seminal text for the idea of civic humanism is Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955). The thesis has subject to much criticism, for instance by Jerrold E. Seigel, “‘Civic Humanism’ or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni,” *Past & Present* 34, no. 1 (1966): 3–48. See also the classic assessment of Florentine republican thought in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975, rpt. 2016). Reflections on the legacy of the idea can be found in James Hankins, *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Cicero, *De Inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 5.

latent in man and the wide field offered by his mind for great achievements if one could develop this power and improve it by instruction. Men were scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats when he assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honourable occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty, and then when through reason and eloquence they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.⁴⁵

Reason is “latent” in humans; it must be brought out and cultivated by persuasion. The anecdote includes several pillars of Ciceronian theory about political life and oratory. One enlightened man, rising above the others, is able to access this latent reason, which shows the great benefits for all with the cultivation of “this power” through “instruction.” Yet the new ruler does not simply exercise the powers of reason alone, using it for individual gain as humans use brute strength in their previous “savage” and “scattered” state. The powers of reason only flourish in the community—undertaken for the benefit of all, relying on the consent of all. What separates humans from the animals, in Cicero’s view, is the convergence of reason with eloquence, which forms the basis of human society. And it is from this principle that cities and governments developed, that justice—the grounds of civic virtue—comes to be realized. He continues, “Certainly only a speech at the same time powerful and entrancing could have induced one who had great physical strength to submit to justice without violence.”⁴⁶ The power of eloquence is its ability to overcome, through persuasion, the violence that dominates the state of nature, and with this triumph justice may flourish in the new community.

The civic humanism that took hold in Italy was an extension of this Ciceronian view of society, rationality, and persuasion through rhetoric. In Florence Cicero was hailed as a champion of Roman republicanism, and his naturalistic, primitivist perspective was fundamental

⁴⁵ Cicero, *De Inventione*, 5–7.

⁴⁶ Cicero, *De Inventione*, 7.

to the the idea that learning—especially rhetoric and the other liberal arts—should be undertaken because of its central importance to the formation of a just and virtuous society. Humanists thus often turned to arguments from prehistory to make sense of current social institutions and cultural practices, to participate in advisory roles that were by necessity subject to political constraints. This was true no matter the political position their role required. The Ciceronian view could also be used to bolster critics of civic humanism with its tendency to favor republics. In what James Hankins calls “a searing critique of Florentine civic humanism,” the humanist political advisor Aurelio Lippi Brandolini prefaces his work on the comparative forms of government—republics and principalities—by tracing the concept of human government to its roots in the state of nature.

While all animals seek the society of their own kind, man in particular does so as he partakes of reason and on his own is too crippled and weak to undertake the tasks of living. Reason enables him to recognize the innumerable fruits and pleasures of social life; his weakness means he always needs the resources and help of others. The rest of the animals act on a basis of equal right among themselves and take few pains to dominate or defer to either their own kind or other kinds, as they have no sense of what it is to lead or obey. But man—remarkable for his mind and reasoning power, who has a fine awareness of the difference between obeying and commanding and who believes himself created by God to rule after His example—man desires to have preeminence and lordship not only over other animals, but also over his own kind. Indeed, nature gives this desire to man of necessity so that social and community life may be preserved. . . .

For these reasons, a single prince was in the beginning established by common consent who might rule the rest and hold them together in peace and social life. Men called this person a “king” because they were ruled by him. That is how this name and this dominion arose on earth.⁴⁷

As in Cicero, governments arise because humans are separated from the animals by their reason and come together to use that reason for their mutual benefit. In the resulting etiology of

⁴⁷ Aurelio Lippo Brandolini, *Republics and Kingdoms Compared*, ed. and trans. James Hankins, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3–5. For Brandolini’s relationship to “civic humanism,” see Hanan Yoran, “Aurelio Lippo Brandolini’s Republics and Kingdoms Compared and the Paradoxes of Humanist Monarchism,” *I Tatti Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 185–212.

governance, the need for society and the desire for dominance over animals and other humans comes both from humanity's reason and its essential weakness—both features of Cicero, but with a more pronounced emphasis on the dominance of one ruler and on the need for civil life to compensate for human fragility. Brandolini finds a king to be the purest expression of these primeval needs, though one raised up by “common consent.” Thus from this primitivist seed in Cicero ideas about political forms among humanists—who could always be found near the centers of political power—were articulated according to the needs of their tendentious positions.

While political theories that made use of the Ciceronian conception of the natural state existed in the Latin middle ages, the unique Renaissance verve for civic humanism, the power of classical rhetoric, and the unapologetic admiration of human accomplishment shows a particularly intense appreciation for Cicero and the kind of thinking his historical etiology made possible.⁴⁸ The Ciceronian origin story is a *locus classicus* of another major pillar of Renaissance thought, the genre of praise known as the “dignity of man.” Giannozzo Manetti's early example of this genre, which shares several characteristics of earlier writing by Petrarch, Salutati, and Valla, seems to arise from a desire to defend Cicero from critics who see his paganism as incompatible with Christian ideals; the result is a text that (while claiming not to) relocates the object of admiration and praise from God to humanity.

The mind is so great and remarkable that all later discoveries and inventions—after the first creation of a world fresh and wild—have evidently been products of ourselves, coming from that special, singular shrewdness of human thinking. Ours indeed are those inventions—they are human—because it is those that are seen as made by humans: all the houses, all the towns, all the cities, including all the structures on earth. . . . Ours are the paintings, ours the sculptures; ours are the crafts, ours the sciences and ours the knowledge . . . Ours are all the kinds of different languages and various alphabets, and the more we realize how indispensable it is to have the use of them, the more forcefully are we compelled

⁴⁸ Cf. Nederman, “The Ciceronian Orator in Medieval Thought.”

to be amazed and marvel at them. For when those first humans and their ancient descendents saw that there was no way to live by themselves and not deal with one another in mutually beneficial relations, they devised a method of speaking, elegant and accurate, using the tongue, with words as intermediaries, to make known to all who heard them whatever ideas were hidden deep in their minds.⁴⁹

A piety that might lead (as it did with *Salutati*) to the priority of “nature” understood as synonymous with God is instead directed toward the variable human invention of “culture.”

The Ciceronian account, like the Vitruvian account, was appealing because of the simple naturalism of its propositions. The story rests on a human-centered pragmatism to which the humanists seem to have been drawn—though they take every opportunity to put forward interpretations that accord with a religious interpretation. Running through some Ovidian and other mythic stories of the origin of humans, Bartolomeo Scala dismisses them as poetic interpretations of the true historical emergence from a wild, pre-cultural condition. Citing Cicero, and focusing on humans’ original use of reason to elevate themselves above their primitive state, Scala creates out of the Ciceronian material another argument for the “dignity of man.”

I doubt that the poets themselves believed that we were born from oaks and tree-trunks, but I think they meant that men were first rough and uncouth, scattered about in the woods, without culture, without shrines, without a settled home. They used tree trunks to shelter from the force and turbulence of winds, and they came forth as naked and shaggy creatures, which led the Greek writers to create these myths. . . . As Cicero says elegantly in his books *On Laws*, ‘This animal we call man [. . .] is the only one among all the kinds of living things who takes part in nature’s rationality, from which all others are excluded.’ And this I think is without doubt the truth, that the gods creating the world and life fashioned men with special care to form something similar to themselves . . . For this reason we alone speak and alone are led by reason to contemplate truth and the nature and majesty of the gods, and seem so much superior to other animate beings that it is difficult not to think and hold for certain that the human race, if not divine owing to the corruption of its corporeal and earthly part, is at any rate not altogether

⁴⁹ Giannozzo Manetti, *On Human Worth and Excellence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 139–41.

mortal.⁵⁰

The ease with which Ciceronian primitivism is adapted to the literature of praise, by linking current expressions of culture to an original, natural state, made it a popular rhetorical tool among the Italian humanists. Cicero and Vitruvius offered accounts that were pared down to what was observable in human experience, and so were flexible in their application. Even better, their accounts justified the professions and preferences of the humanists themselves, for as Guarino writes, “to mankind has been given the desire to know, which is also where the humanities get their name. . . . The ancients also call this *humanitas*, since devotion to knowledge has been given to the human being alone out of all living creatures.”⁵¹ Without ever challenging the praise due to God, Brandolini, Manetti, Scala, and others used Ciceronian versions of originary antiquity to shift their culture’s gaze toward the human subject, all as part of the *studia humanitatis*.

It is clear that the friction produced by these alternate antiquities rubbing up against Christian doctrine attracted sustained attention, but, if anything, the potentially worrying aspects of the challenge provoked ever more concerted efforts to uncover original sources buried in the past. The Neoplatonists represent a peculiar outgrowth of the humanists’ dual desire to explore the variety of antiquities and potential origins newly available to them and to leave Christian understanding and piety relatively undisturbed. Their efforts at developing a “dignity of man” philosophy is based on a concerted search for origins among alternate antiquities and led to a distinctly humanist form of Christian mysticism. A student of Florentine humanism, Marsilio

⁵⁰ Bartolomeo Scala, “Dialogue of Consolation,” in *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Renee Neu Watkins, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 73–75.

⁵¹ Guarini, “A Program of Teaching and Learning,” 307.

Ficino gained a following through his popular lectures on supposedly ancient texts—the Hermetic tracts from Egypt, the ancient Hebrew Cabala, and the wisdom of the Greek Pythagoras. According to Charles Nauert, Ficino’s popularity came from his “excitedly revealing to rapt audiences what he thought of as secret wisdom that went back to the origins of time.”⁵² (These sources were all actually from much later than he believed, but the impulse to believe is telling.) His disciple Pico della Mirandola similarly believed that these sources of knowledge derived ultimately from the very beginnings of civilization, with which his own society had long ago lost contact. His goal in mining the ancient philosophies of the “barbarians” that predated classical civilization was to resolve the conflicts posed by competing worldviews. Like Manetti’s and Scala’s assertions of the dignity of man, the assumption is that the underlying truth, according to Nauert, “would be identical with a purified Christianity. Yet without intending to do so, both [Pico] and Ficino relativized all religions and jeopardized Christianity’s claim to a unique status among the world’s religions.”⁵³ Even if humanists themselves aimed for and asserted perfect compliance with Christian tradition, the course of learning on which they set out necessarily destabilized any unified and coherent sense of the past.⁵⁴

⁵² Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* 2nd ed., Kindle ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵³ Nauert, Kindle ed..

⁵⁴ As Ada Palmer argues, “the mainstream activities of pious humanists generated a new way of imagining the relationship between classical thought and Christianity, which—in the absence of any active desire to undermine theism or dismantle the church—created one of the tools that enabled later deism and similar radical movements.” “Humanist Lives of Classical Philosophers and the Idea of Renaissance Secularization: Virtue, Rhetoric, and the Orthodox Sources of Unbelief,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017): 935–76.

Lucretius

We see the humanist investigations into different versions of original antiquity tipping over into risky territory most clearly in the reception of Lucretius, and in particular through the political writing of Machiavelli. Suppressed in Florence in 1516 on religious grounds, Lucretius's *De rerum natura* was significantly less well-known in Renaissance Italy than Vitruvius, Cicero, and Ovid, (though Florence became a center for the study of the text earlier than elsewhere). But the discovery and reception of his text makes clear the animating, alluring, and potentially destabilizing effect of primitivist ideas. It was, more than the others, a dangerous text to know. It is important to recognize as well the proximity and commensurability of the humanists' use of the Lucretian origin story with their uses of Vitruvius, Cicero, and others, such as the similar narrative in Diodorus Siculus, including attempts to Christianize them.⁵⁵

Like Vitruvius, Lucretius provides a version of early humanity accumulating features of civilization from a first spark, provided by the accident of fire, which leads to the development of social bonds and language, the inventions of rudimentary shelter, farming, government, religion, and gold (book V). Human life before these inventions was hard and animalistic, characterized by fear of wild beasts and a need for survival against the elements, but people were generally happier, content with what nature provided. With the progressive development of civilized invention came increased comfort but also increased vice in the form of vanity, deception, and greed. Nature, too, has been undergoing gradual change, in this case a long-term decline from

⁵⁵ For Lucretius and the anthropological interest it inspired in Renaissance Florence, see Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). For Diodorus in connection to ethnographic and antiquarian Renaissance authors, whom I do not discuss here, see C. Philipp E. Nothaft, "The Early History of Man and the Uses of Diodorus in Renaissance Scholarship: From Annius of Viterbo to Johannes Boemus," in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, vol. 2, ed. Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing, (Leiden: Brill), 711–28.

youthful fecundity which produced many new species into enervated old age. Lucretius's is a vision of history that includes both progress and decline; it takes away from the way the narrative was conceived of—and understood in the Renaissance—to separate them as discrete strands of “primitivist” and “anti-primitivist” thought. The advancement of civilization occurs alongside the ever-worsening spread of corruption; human manipulation of nature advances as nature itself is wearing out. While these narratives could certainly coexist with Christian deep history, their particular features created a version of early humanity that offered an unsettlingly different conceptual framework of human culture, especially when set among Lucretius's cosmology of directionless chance, atomistic ephemerality, and Epicurean morality.

Machiavelli, according to James Hankins, was one of the only truly consequential political thinkers among the Renaissance humanists; his originality as a political thinker comes, at least in part, out of an internalized Lucretian primitivism.⁵⁶ Alison Brown argues that Lucretius's Epicurean primitivism was the source of Machiavelli's naturalistic and expedient morality and that, more broadly, “Lucretius provide[s] an explanatory thread that runs through all Machiavelli's writings, giving them coherence and explaining their novelty.”⁵⁷ (Machiavelli

⁵⁶ James Hankins, “Humanism and the Origins of Modern Political Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 118–41. For the wider impact of Machiavellian and Florentine political thought, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975, rpt. 2016).

⁵⁷ Alison Brown, “Lucretian Naturalism and the Evolution of Machiavelli's Ethics,” in *Lucretius and the Early Modern*, ed. David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison, and Philip Hardie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For the wider impact of Lucretian primitivism and materialism among Florentine humanists, see also Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

read and annotated a copy of Lucretius, which still survives.)⁵⁸ The shocking move in his thought comes from thinking with Lucretius against the Ciceronian account of human origins. In a famous passage of *The Prince*, Machiavelli paraphrases Cicero's claim that "there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force. The first is appropriate for men, the second for animals."⁵⁹ In *De officiis*, Cicero argues that only the former methods are suitable for men, while the latter "are bestial: fraud seems to belong to the cunning fox, force to the lion; both are wholly unworthy of man, but fraud is the more contemptible. But of all forms of injustice, none is more flagrant than that of the hypocrite who, at the very moment when he is most false, makes it his business to appear virtuous."⁶⁰ Using the same figures, Machiavelli directly contradicts Cicero's advice: having a half-bestial nature, humans are better off becoming attuned to it. He follows the paraphrase of man's dual nature with a shocking challenge to the universal pieties of Cicero:

but because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter. Therefore, a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means. . . . Since a ruler, then, must know how to act like a beast, he should imitate both the fox and the lion, for the lion is liable to be trapped, whereas the fox cannot ward off wolves. One needs, then, to be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten away wolves. Those who rely merely upon a lion's strength do not understand matters.⁶¹

He goes on to claim that "men are so naive, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skilful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived" and it is thus

⁵⁸ For Machiavelli's notes on his copy of Lucretius, as well as the reception of other contemporary readers, see Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁵⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Russell Price, ed. Quentin Skinner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, rpt. 2017), 61.

⁶⁰ Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 45–47.

⁶¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61.

better to “seem to” possess generally-recognized virtuous qualities than to actually possess them. The foundation of this expedient and amoral view of things rests in a reconsideration of Cicero’s account of the origins of human society through a Lucretian lens.

As examined above, Cicero posits a common ancestry with animals, but emphasizes the importance of a rupture from that nature in the development of civilization. By contrast, Machiavelli’s conception of politics comes, in Brown’s words, from “narrowing the gap between humans and animals,” following Lucretius’s emphasis on instinctual survival among the harsh conditions and violent competition of early human history.⁶² This influence appears throughout Machiavelli’s writings, notably in his other major political work, the *Discourses on Livy*. Like many other historical and political writers, Machiavelli feels it is important to discuss the origins of his subject, writing in the first chapter “Concerning the Origin of Cities in General and of Rome in Particular.” The second chapter, “How many kinds of State there are and of what Kind was that of Rome,” lays out the kind of primitivist explanation from which deep understanding of modern forms was assumed to come.

For in the beginning of the world, when its inhabitants were few, they lived for a time scattered like the beasts. Then, with the multiplication of their offspring, they drew together and, in order the better to be able to defend themselves, began to look about for a man stronger and more courageous than the rest, made him their head, and obeyed him.

It was thus that men learned how to distinguish what is honest and good from what is pernicious and wicked, for the sight of someone injuring his benefactor evoked in them hatred and sympathy and they blamed the ungrateful and

⁶² Michelle Zerba argues that Machiavelli’s conception of the origins of human society align more with Cicero than has been suggested by most commenters. Acquisitiveness is the key characteristic of both conceptions of natural human impulses, though Machiavelli sees it in terms of survival while Cicero sees the impulse as part of the motivation for the positive human sociability and cooperation. For her, it is Montaigne’s anthropology of human origins that poses the crucial challenge to the Ciceronian tradition, not Machiavelli, who has usually been seen as the key contrasting figure, for example by Quentin Skinner. Michelle Zerba, *Doubt and Skepticism in Antiquity and the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 147–61. Cf. Quentin Skinner, Introduction, *The Prince*, trans. Russell Price, ed. Quentin Skinner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, rpt. 2017), ix–xxiv.

respected those who showed gratitude, well aware that the same injuries might have been done to themselves. Hence to prevent evil of this kind they took to making laws and to assigning punishments to those who contravened them. The notion of justice thus came into being.

In this way it came about that, when later on they had to choose a prince, they did not have recourse to the boldest as formerly, but to one who excelled in prudence and justice.⁶³

He tells a Ciceronian story of the emergence of social systems and morality, but, like Lucretius, tethers it closely to the conditions from which they emerged. Governments were first based the values of the day, i.e. strength, and only later gave way to the more complex moral system of justice. Yet if a recognition of and preference for justice became the basis of the social system at this secondary stage, its bedrock is still animal instinct: the fear that “the wrongs they saw done to others might be done to themselves,” the solution to which is to instill fear of harm through punishment, or the creation of laws. Human rationality plays a role in this story, but it is a rudimentary kind of reason, one small step away from the universal underlying instincts of fear and self-preservation. And if the step toward an organizing principle of justice is a step toward human dignity in the new “knowledge of such things as are honourable and good,” it is simultaneously a trajectory of decline, for “when sovereignty grew to be hereditary and no longer elective, hereditary sovereigns began to degenerate from their ancestors.”⁶⁴ Machiavelli finds in the source material common to Cicero and Lucretius an explanatory paradigm from which arises his uniquely modern attention to human psychology. This vision rests on the atavistic presence of an animal nature in human life, developed under primitive conditions,

⁶³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker, rev. Brian Richardson, ed. Bernard Crick, (New York: Penguin, 1970, rpt. 1983), 106–7.

⁶⁴ Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, 107.

existing beneath the surface even as culture —through simultaneous progress and degeneration, genetic memory and rational forgetting—moves away from its source.

The Poets

To Renaissance humanists, dominion over the spectral realm in which the obscure origins of humanity were found was generally ascribed to “The Poets.” Often this dominion was acknowledged sardonically: poetic evocations tended toward the fanciful and impossibly idyllic, making liberal use of myth, and thus subject to the usual charges against fiction. Jean Bodin pits his sober, humanistic primitivism—one closer to a Lucretian account, which itself is part of a poem—against the pastoral fantasy of poets: “these were the golden and the silver ages, in which men were scattered like beasts in the fields and the woods and had as much as they could keep by means of force and crime.”⁶⁵ The golden and silver ages he refers to come from Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* was the primary source for what seems to have been the most popular vision of the distant past broadly available to Renaissance culture.⁶⁶ In Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation, the story goes,

Then sprang up first the golden age, which of it selfe maintaine
The truth and right of every thing unfort and unconstraine.
There was no feare of punishment, there was no threatning lawe
In brazen tables nayled up, to keepe the folke in awe.
There was no man would crouch or creepe to Judge with cap in hand,
They lived safe without a Judge, in everie Realme and lande.
The loftie Pynetree was not hewen from mountaines where it stood,
In seeking straunge and forren landes, to rove upon the flood.

⁶⁵ Qtd. in Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 124.

⁶⁶ For a wide-ranging account of Renaissance Ovidianism, see Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis & the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986). See also Colin Burrow, “Re-embodiment of Ovid: Renaissance afterlives” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 301–19.

Men knew none other countries yet, than where themselves did keepe:
There was no towne enclosed yet, with walles and diches deepe.
No horne nor trumpet was in use, no sword nor helmet worne,
The worlde was such, that souldiers helpe might easily be forborne.
The fertile earth as yet was free, untoucht of spade or plough,
And men themselves contented well with plaine and simple foode,
That on the earth of natures gift without their travail stooode,
Did live by Raspis, heppes and hawes, by cornelles, plummes and cherries,
By sloes and apples, nuttes and peares, and lothsome bramble berries,
And by the acornes dropt on ground, from Joves brode tree in field.
The Springtime lasted all the yeare, and Zephyr with his milde
And gentle blast did cherish things that grew of owne accorde,
The ground untilde, all kinde of fruits did plenteously afforde.⁶⁷

This is a marked departure from the harder conditions of the above models of primitivism, and makes value-laden assertions where the others prefer neutrality. So too does it emphasize the harmful nature of what others assume is progress: laws do not signify awareness of justice and a moral sensibility, but the introduction of “punishment” and “feare.” Ease, contentment, and freedom characterize the conditions of existence in accordance with nature, while the growth of social systems engenders the greed, inequality, and suffering of the iron age.

Such a vision was held up for mockery, as with Bodin, but it was also recognized that, real as this time may be, the remaining traces are best viewed through the imaginative gifts of the poet. The ambivalence about poetic falsehoods is captured in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, whose hero’s love of literary fantasy is both laughable and ennobling. At one point, inspired by a handful of acorns, Quixote launches into an expansive paraphrase of Ovid’s golden age myth, touching on its main features: the absence of property, or “thine” and “mine”; nature’s sustaining abundance (“In the clefts of rocks and in the hollows of trees, diligent and prudent bees formed their commonwealths, offering to every hand, without requesting anything in return, the rich

⁶⁷ Ovid, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567* trans. Arthur Golding, ed. John Frederick Nims, (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000), 1. 103–124.

harvest of their sweet labours.”); the absence of avarice and ornament in “luxuries of Tyrian purple and martyred and tormented silk,” and so on.⁶⁸ Critics of the times found in the Ovidian golden age a powerful model with which to denounce all manner of modern corruption.⁶⁹ As Renaissance optimism reached its climax, William Bouwsma argues, a countervailing current of skepticism and heightened anxiety about the quality of modernity crept in among many of the leading thinkers of the late sixteenth century.⁷⁰ Appealing to “the poets” and their worlds became especially useful.

While everyone (except Quixote) recognized the elements of fantasy in Ovid’s account, it was in part his treatment of the distant past that established him as the archetypal poet to the Renaissance. Giraldi Cinthio, an Italian author who supplied many of Shakespeare’s plots, writes that “In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid has shown what is fitting for the ingenious poet to do, for abandoning Aristotle’s laws of art with admirable mastery, he commenced the work at the beginning of the world and treated in marvelous sequence a great variety of matters.”⁷¹ Since the world of early humanity was entirely speculative relative to the world of Greco-Roman antiquity for which texts and physical evidence existed, a partial access was possible through the

⁶⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 84–5. See also Frederick A. Armas, “Don Quixote as Ovidian Text” in *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, ed. John F. Miller and Carole Elizabeth Newlands, (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 277–90.

⁶⁹ Paul F. Grendler, *Critics of the Italian World, 1530–1560: Anton Francesco Doni, Nicolò Franco & Ortensio Lando* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

⁷⁰ William James Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550–1640* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁷¹ Giraldi Cinthio, *Giraldi Cinthio on Romances*, trans. Henry L. Snuggs, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 20. This statement comes from an examination of the proper scope of a heroic poem, which he generally believes should include the origins of the action or action it describes. He praises Ovid’s ability to treat an enormous scope and variety of subjects, and makes a distinction between works that treat a single action (after Aristotle) and those that treat “a diversity of matters” (such as Ovid).

etiological fables and myths of poets, who were thought to be inspired by and therefore closest to nature.

Poets, humanists liked to argue, held a certain authority whose province is the truth of nature. Leonardo Bruni sees in poetry a useful tool for engendering virtue, prudence, and eloquence:

In my view, the man who has not read the poets is, as it were, maimed as regards literature. The poets have many wise and useful things to say about life and how it should be lived; in them are to be found the origins and causes of nature and birth—the seeds, as it were, of all teachings. By their antiquity and their reputation for wisdom they possess a high authority.⁷²

The value of the poets comes from two primary qualities: antiquity and special access to original nature. Poetry's unique connection to the natural order resides not in the rational part of humanity, but is instinctual, part of an inborn nature, for "the degree to which poetry accords with nature may, I think, be seen from the fact that common, uneducated persons without any knowledge of letters or learning, if they have the wit, enjoy the employment of their crude powers in making certain sounds and rhythms."⁷³ This notion was confirmed for Renaissance humanists by Cicero's endorsement, the source of Polydore Vergil's assertion of the special role of poetry in the humanist program:

But in his oration *For Archias the Poet* Cicero offers by far the most brilliant explanation, saying: From the greatest and most learned people, nonetheless, we take it that learning other things depends on doctrine and precept and technique, while the poet gets power from something natural; the forces of the mind waken the poet, and a kind of divine spirit breathes into him.⁷⁴

⁷² Leonardo Bruni, "The Study of Literature," in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, ed. and trans. Craig Kallendorf, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 56.

⁷³ Bruni, 59.

⁷⁴ Polydore Vergil, *On Discovery*, 93–5.

It is this image of the poet, who taps into a source of wisdom inherent in nature and accessible even—or especially—to “common, uneducated persons without any knowledge of letters or learning,” that drove the vogue for pastoralism, following Vergil’s *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, and Ovidianism during the sixteenth century in England. Both movements traffic in a fantasy of archaic simplicity in proximity to nature that drew on associations with the art of poetry developed by humanists. Because the nature of the poet’s particular gifts accords so well with the precepts of primitivist interest among humanists, literature and literary criticism became a site at which these thought experiments could be carried out with the necessary freedom and speculative imagination. Indeed, Arthur Ferguson claims that, “If there was such a thing as a philosophy of prehistory [in the Renaissance], it evolved within the parameters of literary criticism.”⁷⁵

As illustrated by its prominence in humanist educational treatises, poetry, particularly that of Ovid and Vergil, played an outsized role in the spread of humanism out of Italy. This was especially the case in sixteenth-century England, where, according to Nauert, “Perhaps nowhere else in Europe, not even in Italy, did education in humanistic subjects (as distinct from education in civil law) become so clearly a part of the common culture of the ruling elite.”⁷⁶ Humanistic reforms did not infiltrate the universities immediately, but throughout the sixteenth century the study of classical literature was established as the cornerstone of the English classroom. The foundations of this education were Latin grammar and the arts of rhetoric, for which the great

⁷⁵ Arthur B. Ferguson, *Utter Antiquity: Perceptions of Prehistory in Renaissance England* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 114.

⁷⁶ Nauert, Kindle ed.

poets of antiquity provided the ever-present models.⁷⁷ Ovid, according to Colin Burrow, was “drilled into schoolboys almost every day of their lives” with exercises that required translating Ovid to and from Latin, paying close attention to the metrical and rhetorical elements of the poem.⁷⁸

Poetry was thought to give students of humanism the best available access to the life of antiquity. Grammar school and university curriculum thus emphasized the imaginative embodiment of historical characters, in a variety of situations and on different sides of various topics, through composition as a way to imitate their virtues, practice persuasion, and generate the *copia* suitable to a humanist education. This humanistic curriculum was dispersed and standardized to a remarkable degree, so that even a common grammar school in the provincial Stratford-Upon-Avon would require intense and intimate contact with the poetry of Ovid and Vergil. Grammar school exercises engendered in students ways of thinking—in form, content, and stance—that derive from inordinately close attention to their poetry. With rhetoric acting as the basis of the humanist curriculum, according to Arthur Kinney, humanist techniques “led naturally, rapidly, and with surprising effectiveness to a particular humanist poetics to be utilized throughout the sixteenth century.”⁷⁹ Through the educational program of sixteenth century England, humanism and poetry became aspects of the same Renaissance project.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ For the impact of rhetoric on the Renaissance understanding of history, see Nancy S. Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970, rpt. 2015).

⁷⁸ Colin Burrow, “Re-embodiment Ovid,” 304. See also Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Burrow, “Shakespeare and Humanistic Culture,” in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9–32.

⁷⁹ Arthur Kinney, “Literary Humanism in the Renaissance” in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 201–2.

⁸⁰ See Sean Keilen, *Vulgar Eloquence: on the Renaissance Invention of English Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), and Clare Carroll, “Humanism and English Literature in the Fifteenth

Beyond this pragmatic training in the rhetorical arts, humanist interest in poetry stems from a more philosophical justification for the *studia humanitatis*. Humanists perceived an association between poetry and primitivism not simply because visions of prehistory appeared in popular texts such as the *Metamorphoses*, but because it was part of a humanistic conception of the role of the poet in human history, as a source for ancient learning and the gifts of language they so loved. Orpheus was the key figure for such conceptions, fitting the role of the Ciceronian orator and filling it out through poetry and music's associations with natural truth.⁸¹ In the humanist mythographer and poet Natale Conti's account in his *Mythologiae*, Orpheus is credited with the inauguration of religion as "the first one to explain the sacred mysteries of the gods and everything else there was to know about theology," and, beyond this, was responsible for humanity's pivot from a state of nature into civilization:

Orpheus found himself living with boorish, lawless men who had no notion of how to behave, and who spent their time wandering through the fields like beasts, without a home or shelter that they could call their own. But these men responded so well to his smooth speech and convincing talk that he was able to turn around their whole way of life, in a gentler, more sophisticated direction. He convinced them to consolidate, to form states of their own, to obey the laws of the new governments, and to keep the marriage contracts that they made. This new way of life was supposed to be the gift of the ancient poets, and there's no doubt about it.⁸²

The major features of the above models of primitive development are repeated here, from laws and governing hierarchies to rituals of marriage. But in claiming culture "to be the gift of the

and Sixteenth Centuries" in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 246–68.

⁸¹ The Orphic orator-civilizer is ubiquitous in early modern discussions of the arts of rhetoric. See Wayne Rebhorn, *The Emperor of Men's Minds: Literature and the Renaissance Discourse of Rhetoric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 24–8.

⁸² Natale Conti, *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*, trans. Steven Brown and John Mulryan, vol. 2, (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 653.

ancient poets,” the account draws on the poets’ mythical stories of Pagan gods in which no one literally believed and places them into the naturalistic and anonymous world of the Vitruvian-Ciceronian-Lucretian accounts.

Polydore Vergil shares Conte’s interpretation, also linking Orpheus’s famed ability to animate inanimate nature and to charm animals with the the historical civilizing of humans.

The testimony of the best poets is that music is very old, for Orpheus and Linus, both god-begotten, were excellent musicians; the former soothed the crude and rustic spirits of humans, and the sweetness of his singing charmed not only wild beasts, as the myths tell it, but even rocks and plants.⁸³

This view of Orpheus, and poetry as a primitivist conduit more broadly, undergirds the theory of poetry in sixteenth-century England. The most significant articulation, by Philip Sidney, draws on the Orpheus-as-civilizer aspect of the myth to justify his broad claims for the supreme role of poetry among the disciplines of learning.

Nay, let any history be brought that can say any writers were there before them, if they were not men of the same skill, as Orpheus, Linus, and some other are named, who, having been the first of that country that made pens deliver of their knowledge to their posterity, may justly challenge to be called their fathers in learning: for not only in time they had this priority (although in itself antiquity be venerable) but went before them, as causes to draw with their charming sweetness the wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge. So as Amphion was said to move stones with his poetry to build Thebes, and Orpheus to be listened to by beasts, indeed stony and beastly people.⁸⁴

Humanists recognized in their own project the claims they made for the primitivist justification of poetry. Referring to “What the poets once sang of the four ages, lead, iron, silver, and gold,” Ficino claims for Florence what Petrarch had hoped could return again from the depths of

⁸³ Polydore Vergil, *On Discovery*, 117.

⁸⁴ Philip Sidney, “The Defense of Poesy,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. B, 10th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, George Logan, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 548–49.

history, “For this century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic lyre, and all this in Florence.”⁸⁵ The line from the poetry and art of antiquity to the expressions of the present was the clear—though not untroubled—motivation for those self-consciously participating in a resurrection of prior forms.

George Puttenham offers a related justification for poetry’s contribution to an understanding of human life, which is founded also on its antiquity. His argument, however, is surprising as a humanist appeal to antiquity: he argues that Greek and Latin verse is *not* a guide to the ancient and original forms to be imitated; instead, the alternate antiquities of the “barbarous” nations are given priority. Even more peculiarly, he uses ethnographic observations of New World peoples to confirm this narrative, eliding the difference between the ancient Britons and the newly-observed inhabitants of the New World.

And the Greek and Latin poesy was by verse numerous and metrical, running upon pleasant feet, sometimes swift, sometimes slow (their words very aptly serving that purpose), but without any rhyme or tunable concord in the end of their verses, as we and all other nations now use. But the Hebrews and Chaldees, who were more ancient than the Greeks, did not only use a metrical poesy, but also with the same a manner of rhyme, as hath been of late observed by learned men. Whereby it appeareth that our vulgar rhyming poesy was common to all the nations of the world besides, whom the Latins and Greeks in special called barbarous. So as it was, notwithstanding, the first and most ancient poesy, and the most universal, which two points do otherwise give to all human inventions and affairs no small credit. This is proved by certificate of merchants and travelers, who by late navigations have surveyed the whole world and discovered large countries and strange peoples wild and savage, affirming that the American, the Peruvian, and the very Cannibal do sing and also say their highest and holiest matters in certain rhyming versicles and not in prose, which proves also that our manner of vulgar poesy is more ancient than the artificial of the Greeks and Latins, ours coming by instinct of nature, which was before art or observation, and used with the savage and uncivil, who were before all science or civility, even

⁸⁵ Marsilio Ficino, “The Golden Age in Florence [Letter to Paul of Middelburg, 1492],” in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, (New York: Penguin, 1953, rev. 1977), 79.

as the naked by priority of time is before the clothed, and the ignorant before the learned. The natural poesy, therefore, being aided and amended by art, and not utterly altered or obscured, but some sign left of it (as the Greeks and Latins have left none), is no less to be allowed and commended than theirs.⁸⁶

Puttenham performs a jarring inversion in which the geographical and cultural peripheries become the center, and what appears modern is in fact ancient and original, while generally-accepted antiquity is a latter-day aberration. The argument shows a revealing wrinkle in narratives about the role of the New World in the ongoing debate about the superiority of the ancients vs. the moderns: the discovery of lands and peoples unknown to the ancients undermines the absolute authority of classical writers not always as an example of modernity's advancements, but as the revelation of founts of antiquity older and more geographically dispersed—among the “barbarous” lands that include the peripheral England—than could be found in the center of classical Rome. And poetry itself enacts the transition from “naked” to “clothed,” as its natural and instinctive features are “aided and amended by art”—that is, still perceptible in the modern vernacular poetry of England.⁸⁷

The drive toward alternate antiquities present in the Italian humanists was given further, and different, impetus outside of Italy. The English could not overlay themselves onto ancient Rome as Petrarch could when he claimed that “Rome would rise up again if she but began to know herself.”⁸⁸ The ground beneath their feet was, from the perspective of the cultural center with whom they identified, inhabited by “strange peoples wild and savage.” But the claim of an

⁸⁶ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 99–100.

⁸⁷ This understanding of the poet's role in primitive antiquity, as Anthony Welch argues, caused Renaissance epic poets to conceive of their works in relation to an imagined oral past. Anthony Welch, *The Renaissance Epic and the Oral Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁸⁸ Qtd. in Mommsen, 240.

identity closer to the “instinct of nature, which was before art and observation” was found to be powerful enough. As humanism spread outside Italy, the sources of alternative antiquities only proliferated; the project of recovery motivated by a fervent desire to know more ancient originals became ever more complex.

With the exception of Machiavelli, none of these texts shook the earth. If any of them did—e.g. *Don Quixote*—it was not because of its use of primitivism. The etiological stories of revered classical authors were found to be flexible enough to be deployed toward whichever argumentative ends were necessary, and so they often became a common but peripheral feature of humanist writing. The humanists sought solid ground on which to build persuasive justifications for laws, forms of government, the legitimacy of their patron, their censure of modern ignorance and corruption, the dignity of human ingenuity, the invention of various arts and customs, and above all for the importance of their own study of the humanities. To the extent that the idea of a primitive past sparked unique and unorthodox perspectives, their intellectual effort was often then spent reining in these provocations so as not to run afoul of Christian teaching or occupational necessity. There is thus an air of sterility to many of these speculations, as if the potential provocations simply passed by unnoticed. This sterility contributes to the charges that humanism created an intellectual culture of rigid deference to the authority of ancient texts, a culture that needed to be broken open by the new knowledge created by experience in the New World. The line to modernity, by some accounts, requires a move away from the humanists’ overzealous reliance on ancient authority in favor of the creation of new knowledge.

Even so, the atavistic impulse that drew humanists to primitivist modes of expression had a significant and long-reverberating impact. From this perspective, the story is not one in which the aura of the past is shed in favor of modern forms of knowledge, but rather one in which the humanists' consuming love of antiquity wins out. The humanists created a view of the world in which the past—in its alien particularity—is embedded in every expression of the present. Out of this new historical consciousness arose a foundational assumption that the truth of things is best observed in its origins. Origins, however, are abundant, far-flung, shrouded in mystery. The flexibility that allowed many of these expressions to be fitted unthreateningly to the orthodoxies of church and state also made the concept of the primitive, as a complex intersection of nature and culture, into an immensely flexible—and therefore immensely powerful—mode of inquiry, interpretation, and imagination.

What was new about the humanists' historical consciousness was not simply the assumption that origins hold special significance, but rather the belief in the central importance of the deep source in combination with the sense of a rift between all discrete cultural moments. The result is an understanding of culture as a situated thing, a whole way of life whose meaning is created and best understood using the tools of humanistic study—the arts of language by which human perspective and human meaning are constructed. As Thomas Greene observes, “What was most dangerous in the humanist enterprise was the effort to exchange one recent past for another, distant one—a brave, perhaps absurd, and in any case profoundly unsettling design.”⁸⁹ As the texts above show, antiquity was more variously conceived than the authority of classical authors is often taken to be. The antique world of the Renaissance was wider and deeper

⁸⁹ Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 34.

than Rome, and Rome itself was often understood as a site of cultural multiplicity. The distance and difference is what made the past alluring; it motivated the search for alternative antiquities and fed the appetite, created by humanists, for the revitalizing experience of the alien and original.

The New Island of Utopia

I.

News of the New World reached a European culture already unsettled by the intellectual currents of humanism, churning with a new, intense focus on the human world, on its origins, on the ways it is and may be shaped. Columbus, while surveying potential sites for settlement on his first voyage, comes upon “a piece of land which is much like an island, though it is not one, on which there were six huts. It could be made into an island in two days.”¹ Brief and insignificant as the detail is, his idea to reform the physical space of the new land suits a culture enlivened by the possibility of such shaping fantasies, of crafting by art the natural and human world. (Leon Battista Alberti asks, “need I stress how, by cutting through rock, by tunneling through mountains or filling in valleys, by restraining the waters of the sea and lakes, . . . through the building of ships . . . the architect has not only met the temporary needs of man, but also opened up new gateways to all the provinces of the world?”)² And if it would not be fair to ascribe Columbus’s ideas to the influence of Renaissance humanism, neither will it do to think of the beginnings of Europe’s encounter with the New World as separate from its impacts. His first impulse on reaching the potential island shows the humanist fantasy of social fashioning in its most savage aspect: “should your Highness command it all the inhabitants could be taken away

¹ Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, ed. and trans. J. M. Cohen, (New York: Penguin, 1969), 58–9.

² Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 3.

to Castile or held as slaves on the island, for which with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we wish.”³

In turn, the news immediately began influencing the shaping fantasies of Europe. In 1494 Pinturicchio painted the earliest known European depiction of Indigenous New World peoples, only recently uncovered, in the Borgia Apartments of the Vatican.⁴ Amerigo Vespucci soon embarked on his four voyages to the New World, dedicating his first letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici of Florence, with whom he had studied under Marcilio Ficino, Angelo Poliziano, and his uncle Giorgio Antonio Vespucci.⁵ Vespucci was thus part of a humanist circle at the heart of the Renaissance, one more arrow in the quiver of talents and interests that made up the exciting new intellectual culture. In 1505-7 the great artist Piero di Cosimo dedicated to Giovanni Vespucci, another relative, a series of paintings famously interpreted by Erwin Panofsky as depicting “the early history of man.”⁶ And the spread of humanism throughout the courts of Europe laid the tracks by which knowledge about the New World spread. The Italian Vespucci and Columbus sailed for Spain and Portugal. The English crown hired the Italian

³ Columbus, 59.

⁴ Elisabetta Povolo, “Early Images of American Indians Found in a Vatican Fresco,” *The New York Times*, (New York, May 6, 2013).

⁵ For this connection and more on the anthropological interests of Renaissance Florence, see Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 39. The second letter was dedicated to Piero Soderini, another Florentine and Gonfaloniere. For more on the impact of the New World on Renaissance Italy, see Lia Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016). For the relationship between Renaissance humanism and the New World in England, see Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶ See Carlo Ginzburg, “Memory and Distance: Learning from a Gilded Silver Vase (Antwerp, C. 1530),” *Diogenes*, English ed. 51, no. 1 (2004): 99–112. For Panofsky on di Cosimo, see Chapter 1 and “The Early History of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero Di Cosimo,” in *Studies In Iconology: Humanistic Themes In The Art Of The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

Cabots to embark on transatlantic journeys soon after. Vespucci's narratives, in which he describes the Indigenous people as "Epicurean," were published in the German Martin Waldseemüller's *Cosmographiae*, which includes the first representation of the New World as a separate continental island and gives it the name America.⁷ Through these channels and possibly in this form, the letters found their way to Thomas More and to his garden in Antwerp to be pondered by humanists and diplomats.

More's *Utopia* purports to be a sequel to Vespucci's travels, "accounts of which are now common reading everywhere," describing in detail the culture and practices of New World epicureans whom Hythloday encounters after volunteering to be left behind on Vespucci's fourth voyage.⁸ *Utopia* is also meant to travel along the same humanist tracks as Vespucci's accounts: More claims to have met Hythloday on a real diplomatic mission to the international city of Antwerp, where they engage in a conventional humanist dialogue on familiar topics; it was published first in Latin, then in many other languages; it is surrounded by commendatory letters from other notable figures, announcing that the book itself moves in the same circles. Within the narrative, however, the familiar and comfortable setting of the humanist dialogue opens out into a new and shocking world as Hythloday describes the alien society of Utopia. He ushers in Book 2, his description of the island, with an account of its peculiar origins:

They say (and the appearance of the place confirms this) that their land was not always an island. But Utopus, who conquered the country and gave it his name . . . also changed its geography. After winning the victory at his first landing, he cut a channel fifteen miles wide where their land joined the continent, and caused the sea to flow around the country.⁹

⁷ Amerigo Vespucci, *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci*, trans. and ed. Clements R. Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1894, reissued Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

⁸ Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. and trans. George M. Logan, New York: W. W. Norton, 2011.

⁹ *Utopia*, 39.

The creation of the island indicates that an extreme rupture is taking place. It is a rupture in the text itself, for the world of Utopia stands at a remove from that of More's garden. Utopia strikes us as the new island struck its neighbors, at one turn with amusement at Utopus's "folly," at the next "with wonder and terror."¹⁰ The physical division of the land asserts a strange concordance between nature and culture at the core of the Utopian myth. An island suggests the natural boundaries of a cohesive people rather than arbitrary human borders, and yet here it is also the mark of extreme artifice, a concerted effort to shape every aspect of Utopian life.

The subject of *Utopia* after this point is its culture, laid out under the conventional headings: religions, customs, occupations, laws, social relations, and so on. Keeping this act of island-making in view, we should situate *Utopia* at that heady moment of 1516, near the origin of certain institutions and concepts that would take shape over the following centuries.¹¹ It will therefore be useful to think of Utopia, at a first pass, as in some ways an "imagined community," Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation, for More is exceptionally concerned with the imaginary fictions by which people organize themselves.¹² Henry S. Turner's conception of the early modern corporation will prove even more useful, since one always participates in many overlapping corporate bodies, and More's acute feeling that he plays many parts for many

¹⁰ *Utopia*, 39.

¹¹ Sarah Hogan, for example, connects the early modern Utopia with the emergence of global capitalism even as she sees it as a transitional text, "looking both backward *and* ahead". The Utopian island-making project, she argues, "is an effort to reexamine England's place in a new world" by combining old and new discourses, suggesting "a worldview that anticipated the social and spatial ideals of capitalist-imperialist accumulation" and is part of an early modern trend of depicting fantastic feats of territorial engineering for imperial purposes, pairing it with Bacon's bridge-building in *New Atlantis*. Hogan, *Other Englands: Utopia, Capital, and Empire in an Age of Transition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 29, 71.

¹² Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983, revised ed., 2006).

amorphous wholes is palpably behind this work. These corporate forms of association were various in early modern England—they could be “educational, ecclesiastical, charitable, political, and commercial”—and they are always poised uneasily between fictional, imaginative, invisible constructions and practical reality.¹³ The totality of such imagined fictions is one’s culture, in E. B. Tylor’s seminal definition, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” In Clifford Geertz’s more evocative phrase, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”¹⁴ *Utopia*, in its dizzying oscillation between reality and fiction, its attention to how humans shape and are shaped by their worlds, represents a revolutionary attempt to make those webs of culture visible.

The argument of this chapter will be centrally concerned with the exceptional account of culture created by More’s *Utopia*, particularly as it is created by the intersection of humanist thought and the New World. I will make several interlinked claims.

¹³ Turner’s definition of the early modern corporation is “any enduring form of activity that is undertaken collectively and in which the whole is perceived to be distinct from and even prior to its parts, since it is always in excess of the elements that compose it.” His conception of the early modern corporation goes beyond the legal definition, “in which the corporation appears as an ‘artificial’ or a ‘fictional’ person created by law for its own technical purposes to be distinct from the individual members who make it up,” and intersect with early modern theories of fiction. He argues that *Utopia* is modeled on the early modern corporation. Henry S. Turner, *The Corporate Commonwealth: Pluralism and Political Fictions in England, 1516–1651* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Geertz offers his definition of culture as a deliberately more limited and refined object than Tylor’s. I justify the inclusion of both concepts with the view that More is most concerned with both the totality and the emphasis on human interpretation. And, of course, he would not have had an abstract model to work with anyway, fuzzy or precise. See the Introduction for my use of “culture” as an early modern concept. We should also note, however, that More’s depiction of culture pays special attention to the material, natural environment between which these webs are spun: gold, agriculture, wool, the physical island that was once not an island, and should probably be seen as more encompassing than Tylor’s. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Customs* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1871), preface. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973, rpt. 2000), 5.

1. More gathers together many of the most significant ideas of the humanist tradition explored in the previous chapter, namely: bringing the “primitive” to the center of importance in understanding the human world; conceiving of the “primitive” as a crux between nature and art (or culture), separate but entwined categories; situating things in their historical and social context, including seeing humans as situated within a holistic social system and shaped by that system; and understanding meaning as created through artful language, often located in the interstitial movement of dialogue, the play of perspectives.
2. These ideas took on extreme form because of the New World, both the novel fact of its presence and the view of distant peoples represented in New World ethnography. The full implications of the above ideas impressed themselves more forcefully now that people who seemed to be “primitive” could be seen to actually exist, while the ethnographic observations suggest that humans are incredibly malleable according to their culture.
3. The challenge of the New World and the shocking difference of its cultures provokes at once an acute sense of the limits of imagination (the whole continent was unknown to Europeans just decades before) and of its wide reach (one can, in fact, imagine ways of life radically different from one’s own). The result is a pervasive sense of absurdity, for the role of culture in human life is revealed to be at once absolutely tenacious and almost entirely arbitrary.
4. More’s response to this challenge is an especially heightened sense of both reality and imagination, creating an endless loop between them. Imaginative fictions are constantly being shattered as they come in contact with solid reality, only for the real to then reveal its own fictional existence. Ethnography supersedes conjecture by describing the real at first hand, but is itself governed by imagination; imagined societies are dismissed as daydreams, but provide the impetus to see real societies as fictions.
5. The complex of ideas around human culture in *Utopia* is radical—the result of a singular perception—and representative of a historical break-point. *Utopia* captures many of the ways in which the New World crashed in on the European world in the centuries to come.

In mainstream scholarly accounts of *Utopia* its humanism is opposed to its New World connections, and the outcome has been clear: no contest. Humanism is the winner, severing all but the weakest links to the New World. I argue, instead, that humanism and the New World are intimately related in *Utopia*. And, while recognizing the massive importance of humanism to More’s text and indeed the whole European encounter with the New World, they should be seen to be related in such a way that the New World comes away the victor. *Utopia*’s groundbreaking

account of culture is found in its sense of irremediable, totalizing fiction that cannot become untethered from the solid reality that everyone feels.¹⁵ This understanding of fiction is there in the drama of the humanist dialogue, the understanding of social life as a stage-play, but we are able to see the situation in all its radical potential because of Utopia. And it is best found in More's creation of a New World culture, set in a world that conspicuously asserts its reality while, like the New World itself, reaching out and touching cultures everywhere, revealing their essential unreality as well as their immense power.

From the island's extreme point of origin, Hythloday tells us, Utopus transforms his society, bringing "its rude inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now excel in that regard almost every other people."¹⁶ Hythloday repeatedly emphasizes the almost unimaginable character of what he describes to his interlocutors, and the distance is figured as an ethnographic one: the Utopians' extreme difference is in the "level of culture" that matches their geographical distance, for they live "in that new world, which is as distant from ours in customs and way of life as in the distance the equator puts between us."¹⁷ The "new world" setting echoes Vespucci's designation *Mundus Novus*, the title of a widely circulated edition of his letter to de' Medici, so-called "because none of these countries were known to our ancestors, and to all who hear about them they will be entirely new."¹⁸ More, however, is careful that Hythloday's report

¹⁵ Others have emphasized the paradoxical relationship between fiction and truth, imagination and reality in *Utopia*, most influentially Stephen Greenblatt, "At the Table of the Great: More's Self-Fashioning and Self-Cancellation," in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 11–73, who writes of More, "It is as if he were watching the enactment of a fiction, and he is equally struck by the unreality of the whole performance and by its immense power to impose itself upon the world." Greenblatt, 13.

¹⁶ *Utopia*, 39.

¹⁷ *Utopia*, 76.

¹⁸ *Utopia*, 42.

not contain the familiar traveler's fantasies of "monsters and wonders," which are "common," but instead humanist fantasies about the unification of nature and culture, the possibility of creating new ways of life that will revive the lost origins of humanity.¹⁹ These are the concerns of Cicero, with his interests in the *res publica* and tendency to look back to the original formation of society, and of Plato's ideal *Republic*, built (in imagination) from scratch.²⁰ They are even more so the concerns of the modern scholars and advisors, like More, Erasmus, and Guillaume Budé, who hope to bring about a higher level of civilization, a new world of their own.

All of Utopia's nearly unimaginable promises, that is, are expressions of humanist values and desires, produced by its methods and modeled on its key texts. From the dialogic form to the focus on the *otium/negotium* debate, to the slew of classical echoes, the fare is familiar to those in More's circle. At the same time, however, *Utopia* insists on its newness, the possibility of breaking free from the well-worn grooves of one's habits, practices, customs, and horizons—one's culture, including humanist culture. The work voices the possibility of breaking away through Hythloday's ethnography of the New World, a form clearly aligned with humanist interests and yet, in More's hands, a vision that challenges the limitations of their world, and indeed anything that contributes to the stultifying layers of sediment built up by his society.

As Machiavelli was digesting radical Lucretian primitivism alongside the the New World primitivism of Vespucci's letters in Florence, More was conceiving his experimental work on the

¹⁹ *Utopia*, 13.

²⁰ See Dominic Baker-Smith, "Uses of Plato by Erasmus and More," in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92–8.

formation of a commonwealth from the same materials.²¹ More's *Utopia* represents a watershed moment in which New World ethnography joins humanist interest in the origins of human society. The result of this union is one of the most remarkable works of the age, a work that gathers together the Renaissance's invigorated interest in human culture, its primitivist impulse, and its belief in the possibilities of human creation through imagination and art. *Utopia* puts on display how European ways of understanding the inhabitants of the New World came to be grafted onto the primitivist inclinations of humanism, as the encounter developed into an ever more complex and fraught relationship, shaping Europeans' understanding of human culture as well as their fantasies.

We therefore move from a broad and rather flimsy category of "ethnography" that might characterize the texts of the previous chapter—a way of writing about cultures distant in time or space derived almost entirely from other books and one's own speculative imagination, a rhetorical and tendentious, if stimulating, mode with only the most tenuous grasp on truth—to one in which internal divisions begin to emerge between that bookish mode and what has been observed at first hand.²² It will not do to assign separate categories to the ethnology shaped by

²¹ Alison Brown argues that Machiavelli's reading of Lucretius influenced *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²² I take early modern ethnography to be any writing about what they usually described as the "manners and customs" of other peoples. A great deal of scholarship has focused on the transition from the former mode to the latter, i.e. the rise of empirical, scientific ethnography or anthropology that corresponds roughly to the rise of experience over textual authority. Anthony Pagden calls the form of witness "autopic authority" and traces its development in *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. See also Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Mary Baine Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). This development is also the basis of the older, but still valuable, studies by Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

the imagination and one that attempts to be systematic and objective, for the spectacular energy of *Utopia* comes from More's understanding that, though the division is there, there is no weeding out the imagination from the perception of the real world. *Utopia* pretends to be one (a true, eye-witness report of solid reality) but is in fact the other. The internal fissures in the category of ethnography, at this pivotal point in history, are also the fissures at the core of *Utopia*.²³

From the beginning, the hallmark of New World writing was what I will call “negative ethnography,” a rhetorical convention sometimes called the “negative formula” or “negative description”: a way of describing others as lacking familiar markers of culture, typically private property, laws, letters, traffic, currency, social hierarchy, marriage, religion, clothes, iron, war, and so on.²⁴ The thinnest of thin descriptions, it is an extreme example of the fault-lines within early modern ethnography outlined above. Negative ethnography is at once the most anti-observational, traditional, mythic description possible and the one that characterized the early eye-witness reports, with at least some accuracy. A long-standing practice, this mode of description became a staple in the lexicon of the Renaissance in part because it could apparently be applied to the inhabitants of the New World. It is a naïve mode of description—sometimes consciously so, sometimes not—which registers first of all the fact of extreme, basic difference and its jarring effect. It can, however, cover a deeper understanding of human culture

1964, and John Howland Rowe, “Ethnography and Ethnology in the Sixteenth Century.” *The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* 30 (1964): 1–19.

²³ I therefore prefer to use “ethnography” (the representation of other cultures) to the roughly equivalent “ethnology” and “anthropology” (the organization of ideas about other cultures) because it keeps the fact of written representation, and therefore the shadow of fiction, in view.

²⁴ See Hodgen 196–201 and Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969.

fundamental to an emergent early modern anthropology in which the “primitive,” the imagined existence of human origins in “nature,” is brought to the center of importance. In describing other cultures according to a lack of prominent cultural features, this negative ethnography asserts that the crucial division represented in the encounter is that between a state of nature and a condition of culture. Negative ethnography indicates that the object of description is aboriginal, aligned with nature, and therefore separated from either the corrupting or civilizing influences of culture.

Utopia—“No-place”—is structured around this negative ethnography. Unlike its use in much travel writing, the negative structure is not here a solipsistic refusal to see anything but the fact of difference, but instead grounds for deep reflection on the possibilities represented by human difference: the possibility of malleability and of transformation through the forces of culture, the possibility of regaining, at least in some respects, the experience of an original condition. At the same time, *Utopia*’s sly insistence on its own non-existence pulls back on the ethnographic claim to discover and describe something that is actually out there. The negative and the ethnographic, joined together in *Utopia*, also form the crux of More’s incredible perception that imaginative fiction has an immense, enveloping grasp over the real, that this fiction in fact almost entirely constructs the human world. The New World just then coming into view is at the heart of these perceptions, and they would in turn shape the meaning and effects of the New World in the centuries to come.

II.

Conspicuously a product of the imagination, of negation, *Utopia* nevertheless presents itself as *real*: the result of a real conversation between Thomas More, Peter Giles, and other humanists on a diplomatic mission to Antwerp. The description of the island of Utopia and its people is given by Raphael Hythloday as only one perspective within a humanist dialogue whose concerns largely inhabit a world recognizable to More's contemporaries. More takes pains to situate Hythloday's fantastic ethnography within his own transparent ethnography, for he claims in the prefatory letter to Peter Giles that "as you were well aware, I faced no problem in finding my materials, and had no reason to ponder the arrangement of them. All I had to do was repeat what you and I together heard Raphael describe."²⁵ And what More describes would be more than familiar to anyone in his circle of correspondants. The central topic of the "best state of the commonwealth" is perennial in humanist letters, and is all the more recognizable as part of Book 1's debate on service, which turns on classic humanist topics of deliberation: whether to commit oneself to civic life and its compromises or to preserve uncontaminated truth by refusing that world, the relative virtues of honesty and efficacy, the nature of true nobility, and other well-trod ground. Nested within commendatory and prefatory letters between real luminaries such as Erasmus and Guillaume Budé, the text itself traffics in the wider world of ongoing humanist dialogue outside of its literary frame. As has long been recognized, and especially since J. H.

²⁵ He continues, "There was no occasion, either for labor over the style, since what he said, being extempore and informal, couldn't be couched in fancy terms. And besides, as you know, he's not a man so well versed in Latin as in Greek; so that my language would be nearer the truth, the closer it approached to his casual simplicity. Truth in fact is the only quality at which I should have aimed, or did aim, in writing this book." This complex and ironic assertion of truth is the main theme of the letter. Its relationship to New World ethnography and fiction will be developed below.

Hexter established that the composition of Book 2 preceded that of the enveloping Book 1, the dialogue form is an essential element in constructing the meaning of the text.²⁶ What is more, its use of dialogue marks *Utopia* as an essentially humanist text: it recalls both the great tradition of the Platonic dialogues and the open-minded, deliberative, ambiguous Ciceronian dialogues with which contemporary humanists were so enamored.²⁷

No reader fails to recognize the explicit influence of the New World encounter and Vespucci's widely circulated account of his voyages on *Utopia*, yet the prevailing mode of criticism has been focused on the assumption that it is first and foremost a humanist text. The dominant critical position on *Utopia* has been the "humanistic interpretation," which considers the text primarily as a work of Renaissance humanism and situates it within that tradition, developed by Edward Surtz and practiced by the most influential twentieth-century commenters on More, including J. H. Hexter, Quentin Skinner, Elizabeth McCutcheon, and George Logan.²⁸ Arthur Kinney's claim about the best way of understanding the text is paradigmatic: "Boxes

²⁶ J. H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: The Biography of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), John Freeman, "Discourse in More's Utopia: Alibi/Pretext/Postscript," *ELH* 59 (1992): 288–311 also argues that the dialogue of Book 1 "encloses" the description of Book 2 and forces it to participate in the historical process.

²⁷ See David Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue, Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), and Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁸ Logan defines the "humanistic interpretation" and attributes its initial development to Frederick Seebohm: "that the primary affiliation of *Utopia* is with the tradition of Renaissance humanism and that the best approach to the interpretation of the book accordingly lies in placing it as accurately as possible in the context of humanism and of the wider currents of thought and action of which that movement forms a part." George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's Utopia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, rpt. 2014), ix. See also Hexter and Surtz's introduction to the Yale *Complete Works*, Elizabeth McCutcheon, *My Dear Peter: The 'Ars Poetica' and Hermeneutics for More's Utopia* (Angers, France: Moreanum, 1983), and James McConica, "Thomas More as Humanist," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22–45.

within boxes, classical sources and allusions nestled within one another, the world of humanist learning serves to point the way to proper understanding of *Utopia* then and now as well as to a constructive and pioneering development of a humanist poetics of fiction.”²⁹ And although in adducing parallels and sources this criticism sometimes unfortunately consigns *Utopia* to the recombination of already well-worn humanist positions, it has by no means led to consensus about how best to understand More’s text. To Hexter, the Utopians represent an ideal: a heathen people more truly Christian than the nominally Christian Europeans, a conclusion that the ironies of the dialogue form help bring about. To Kinney, Gerard Wegemer, and others, the ironies produced by recognizing the humanist elements lead toward skepticism of Hythloday and the Utopians’ way of life. To Skinner, “for all the ironies and ambiguities in More’s text, his main aim was to challenge his readers at least to consider seriously whether Utopia may not represent the best state of a commonwealth,” and, in the dialogue of Book I, revive the ideal of a politically engaged civic or Ciceronian humanism in opposition to a more detached Platonist strain. George Logan sees the work as a “best-commonwealth” thought experiment based on the methodology of Greek (Platonic and Aristotelian) and Stoic theories, and the sometimes strange, sometimes enlightening, always challenging society of the Utopians is the result of seriously playing out such an experiment. All recognize that, despite the importance of recognizing other books and ideas, *Utopia* offers something palpably *new* to More’s intellectual world, and deserves its place in the pantheon of Renaissance works.³⁰

²⁹ Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 78.

³⁰ A useful counterpoint to the tendency to see *Utopia* as inaugurating a new genre are the essays in *Utopias, Medieval and Early Modern* a special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006), especially Patricia Clare Ingham, “Making All Things New: Past, Progress, and

In these readings the keystone of the text tends to be its dialogic form, the source of the text's ambiguity and irony, and the primary issue is how best to grapple with the wrinkles it produces. For many, such as Eric Nelson, Hexter, Skinner, and Logan, *Utopia* remains a serious work of political philosophy that really does aim at the "best state of the commonwealth," even if it is not entirely straightforward about it. But the dialogic complexity has led many, including Chloë Houston, Alistair Fox, Richard S. Sylvester as well as Kinney and Wegemer, toward a dim view of Hythloday—and thus Utopia—and a favorable view of the comparatively skeptical character More.³¹ Rigid, idealistic, contemptuous of and disengaged from the civil world, the former character fails to live up to the humanist values laid out by Cicero and others, while the latter shows a subtle mastery of them. Harry Berger Jr. sees the point of the dialogue as revealing "Hythloday's radical idealism," which is "that of a closed inner world: it is pure and monological, not open to time, to correction, compromise or the interplay of perspective made possible by dialogue and conversation."³² Not only does the dialogue of Book 1 offer possible ways of critiquing Book 2's assertions, but the dialogic form itself acts as a critique of Hythloday's method. His monologue is necessarily limited by its single perspective and, in the world of

the Promise of Utopia," 479–92. See also Anne Lake Prescott, "Afterlives" in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 256–87.

³¹ Chloë Houston, *The Renaissance Utopia: Dialogue, Travel and the Ideal Society* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2014), Alistair Fox, *Utopia: An Elusive Vision* (New York: Twayne, 1993), Harry Berger, Jr. "The Renaissance Imagination: Second World and Green World" *The Centennial Review* 9 (1965), 36–77, Richard S. Sylvester, "'Si Hythlodaeo Credimus': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's *Utopia*" *Soundings* 51 (1968): 271–89, who argues, "We do not go wrong if we see Book II as an extended image of Hythlodaeus' own personality: Utopia enshrines his ideals and virtues, but it also—and he himself is completely unaware of this—hints at the defects in his thinking and at the moral flaws in his character." Sylvester, 298–99.

³² Berger, Jr., "The Renaissance Imagination: Second World and Green World," 63.

dialogue-loving humanists, an affront to the virtues of their broad-minded, multi-perspective mode of inquiry.

These humanist values inform and structure More's work on such a deep level that they are assumed to be the standards by which we should discern what is wise and what is ridiculous, what stands as useful example, what is persuasive and what fails to persuade. Attending to the dialogic form, especially once we are attuned to the ways the traditional humanist *topoi* are expressed, underscores all the ways the humanist situation of Book 1 pulls back on the assertions of Book 2. If it does not provide any clear answers, the surrounding dialogue nevertheless makes it impossible to read the description of Utopia as an unambiguous trumpeting of the ideal commonwealth, creating the impression that the frame may be pulled back to reveal a wider view.

Utopia is both the beginning and high-water mark of the humanist dialogue in the English Renaissance. According to J. Christopher Warner, it "is something of an exotic island in English literature" in its expression of the open, ambiguous, experimental mode that made the dialogue a favored genre and essential methodological tool among humanists. (There are very few other examples of the English Renaissance dialogue, according to Warner, that achieve real ambiguity rather than obvious didacticism—or even attempt it.) The stress is on the unresolved, multiple perspectives of the work: the sense that More is playing a characteristic Renaissance game of arguing *in utramque partem*, on both sides of the question, in which both sides convince. In Joel Altman's study of the role of this rhetorical mode of inquiry in the creation of Renaissance literature, *Utopia* is an key example of how the continuous dialogic investigation of a question may be transformed into rich imaginative literature, coming to full fruition in Shakespeare's

theater.³³ Chloë Houston views the dialogue as a mode of verisimilitude that works alongside the verisimilitude of travel narratives in *Utopia* and throughout early modern utopian literature.³⁴ As several critics have argued, the dialogue—and more profoundly the divergent impulses of the two books—reveals an irreconcilable division within More himself as he negotiated between a life in civil service as counselor to Henry VIII, in which he would suit himself to the play at hand, and one of philosophical estrangement from the world and himself. The best account of this division is Stephen Greenblatt's, which understands the dialectic of full participation in the constructed roles of the world and a desire for self-cancellation as a means of escape, traceable throughout More's life, to be at the heart of *Utopia*.³⁵

If we are primed by the dialogic element to see all the ways *Utopia* undermines itself, we are everywhere rewarded for the effort. It is, as Anne Lake Prescott calls it, a “rabbitduck”: of a double nature, both sportive and serious, and able to be seen coherently either way.³⁶ In contrast to several of the above critics, C. S. Lewis has famously argued that the work is more *jeu d'esprit* than serious proposition:

The truth surely is that as long as we take the *Utopia* for a philosophical treatise it will 'give' wherever we lean our weight. It is, to begin with, a dialogue: and we cannot be certain which of the speakers, if any, represents More's considered

³³ He sees in *Utopia* an example of “the declension of a question into an explorative fiction,” which joins Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* to explain how the humanistic mode of inquiry took on this role: “The creation of such fictional questions seems to have been the common result of training minds to think about ideas, events, and persons *in utramque partem*, and teaching that it is through particulars that one can most sensitively judge the issue at hand.” Joel B. Altman, “Propaedeutic for Drama: Questions as Fiction,” in *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 64–106, 64.

³⁴ Houston concludes that “it is through its dialogue form that *Utopia* undertakes a criticism of utopia by showing the failings of ideal-state fiction.” Houston, 48.

³⁵ Greenblatt, “At the Table of the Great.”

³⁶ Anne Lake Prescott, Review of *The Meaning of More's Utopia* by George M. Logan, *Renaissance Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1984): 444–47.

opinion. . . . On my view, however, it appears confused only so long as we are trying to get out of it what it never intended to give. It becomes intelligible and delightful as soon as we take it for what it is—a holiday work, a spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits, a revel of debate, paradox, comedy and (above all) of invention, which starts many hares and kills none.³⁷

To literary critics who attend first of all to the language and find the force of *Utopia* in its imaginative creation, the work has seemed most brilliant in its elusiveness. The ludic sense of paradox is not only a product of the dialogue genre, but is built into the language at the molecular level. Elizabeth McCutcheon's influential rhetorical analysis has demonstrated the importance of More's almost obsessive use of litotes—"denying the contrary," or double negation.³⁸ The zig-zagging rhetorical game of negation is present even in the full title, *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*: a book "no less [*nec minus*] beneficial than entertaining," a "new island" that is "nowhere." This view of *Utopia* as satirical game has been more pronounced among literary critics than political theorists and historians, and is easy enough to ignore if one senses that *Utopia* is, at its core, basically the sincere thing it seems to be. Still, both the ideas and the way they are presented are essential to constructing a properly humanist understanding of the work, and even more so to an understanding not entirely circumscribed by humanist concerns.

"Utopia," More's neologism, owes its impressive afterlife in part to the suggestive yet easily-intelligible playfulness of the Greek meaning, "No place." The wordplay makes conspicuous the essential labyrinthine quality of *Utopia*, the subtle, ironic arabesques spun into its fabric. When the name is first introduced in the prefatory letter, it is part of the conceit that

³⁷ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 168–9.

³⁸ Elizabeth McCutcheon, "Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Litotes in the *Utopia*," *Moreana* 8, no. 31–32 (1971): 106–21.

More is simply setting down what he really heard and wants to get the details right. He hopes Peter will help him clear up two important points:

Anyhow, as I recall matters, Hythloday said the bridge over the Anyder at Amaurot was five hundred yards long; but my John says that is two hundred yards too much—that in fact the river is not more than three hundred yards wide there. . . [And] it didn't occur to us to ask, nor to him to say, in what area of the New World Utopia is to be found.³⁹

More's attempt to reconcile the invented physical dimensions of a bridge spanning a "waterless river" (*Anyder*: waterless) is a version of the winking joke inherent in precisely locating "No place" within a nameable ocean, and indeed the rest of the puzzling ironies as well as the text's relationship to the New World are in some way an extension of this first one. The assertion of simple clarity, truth, and ignorance is itself suspect, as More underscores in another letter appended to the second edition:

But when he [a reader] wonders whether *Utopia* is fact or fiction, then I find *his* judgment, in turn, sorely at fault. I do not deny that if I'd decided to write about a commonwealth, and a tale of this sort had occurred to me, I might have spread a little fiction, like so much honey, over the truth, to make it more acceptable. But I would certainly have tempered the fiction a little, so that, while it deceived the common folk, I gave hints to the more learned which would enable them to see what I was about. So, if I'd done nothing but give special names to the governor, the river, the city, and the island, which hinted to the learned that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river waterless, and that the governor had no people, that would not have been hard to do, and would have been far more clever than what I actually did.⁴⁰

The game being played is, at least to those with a bit of humanistic awareness, obvious: More is playing the fool, ironically disclaiming the wit needed to do precisely what he has done. He thus draws attention to the fictive unreality of his work, but in doing so he offers a more profound

³⁹ *Utopia*, 7.

⁴⁰ Thomas More to Peter Giles, *Utopia*, ed. Logan, 143.

reflection on the challenges posed by New World and its relationship to the humanist imaginary—topics to which we will soon return.

As More underscores in these letters, the many names in *Utopia* play out the same game, creating a world of particularity that at the same time works to negate any particular existence. More's naming is characteristically Janus-faced, each name working against its asserted meaning: one set of rulers, *Ademos*, are at once *ademon*, not native, *adema*, without form or idea, and *a demos*, without people; another, the *Barzanes*, are leaders of cattle; *Amaurot* is the unknown city, and so on.⁴¹ More points to these moments in the letter, but the game goes further. The text's apparent attempt to stabilize its messengers by situating the report in a real place with real people, including the author himself, is deflected by their names. *Hythlodæus* is a peddler of nonsense, and *Morus*—supposedly the author himself—is a fool. The author-character's name may also suggest a *memento mori* when placed beside Holbein's skull-like frontispiece, *mores* for customs, *morus* for the "Moor" of generalized exotic spaces, even *morus*, the mulberry tree.⁴²

In the potential proliferation of quibbles that deny their own existence, More marks the things of his fictional world as untrustworthy bearers of meaning. One purpose of this elusive naming is to hedge against the reality of the thing named, to allow the elements of Utopia to float

⁴¹ Eric Nelson notes that "almost everything [Hythlodæus] describes from his travels has a name coined from Greek words connoting 'nonsense' or 'nonexistence' (a quality which renders things nonsensical)." Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.

⁴² Punning on More's name was a common practice among More and his contemporaries, including Erasmus in his correspondences with More. For an overview of the use of these and other puns, see Germain Marc'hadour, "A Name for All Seasons," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R.S. Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1977), 539–62. The pun on "Moor" is explored in Patricia Parker, "What's in a Name, and More," *Sederi* 11 (2000): 101–50. *Mores* as customs or morals is explored in Stephanie Elsky, "Common Law and the Commonplace in Thomas More's *Utopia*," *English Literary Renaissance* 43, no. 2 (2013): 181–210. See also James Romm, "More's strategy of naming in the Utopia," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22 (1991), 173–83.

freely rather than become anchored to the flawed things of the real world. Another is to cloud the apparently stable things of this real world—More’s claims to write only the truth as it happened, even the acutely observed issues of justice and inequality besetting England—with the same shadow of artful construction. The undermined assertions of Book 2 are bound up with Hythloday’s skepticism in Book 1 about the effectiveness of the humanist counselor’s mere words, however dexterously applied, on the real conditions of state and society. And if many of the terms with which I have been attempting to describe More’s most important subjects—reality, imagination, fiction, nature, culture—seem impossibly elusive, as if the meaning were a shell game in which the thing being described is transferred imperceptibly from one category to the next, it should be clear why that is.

The description of Utopia is thus reflected differently from the perspective of More’s garden. The question of how we should understand the island sits upon the same balanced scale as the dialogue of Book 1. What is at issue in Book 1 is the possibility that the rhetorical dexterity and malleability on display—the achievement of a humanist love of rhetoric—might bring about a better society. This is, moreover, the position of the character More in Book 1 rather than Hythloday. He admits that the “academic philosophy” that is suitable for conversations among friends, and which Hythloday prefers, has no place in the councils of kings. “How can you win over their minds with such out-of-the-way speeches?” Instead, the character More proposes,

There is another philosophy that is better suited for political action, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand, and acts its part neatly and appropriately. . . So go through with the drama in hand as best you can, and don’t spoil it all simply because you happen to think of a play by someone else that would be better.⁴³

⁴³ *Utopia*, 33–4.

The dilemmas that *Utopia* poses, though seemingly remote and radical, are in fact the dilemmas anyone aiming for the good in public life must face. The work as a whole—not just the description of Utopia and the settled answers it provides, but even more so the humanistic tools by which it should be read, an understanding of the work’s drama—is the “truly golden little book” of the title that leads toward the “best state of the commonwealth.” Or it may, if handled with the subtlety of a skillful rhetorician who plays his part well.

The character More’s goals are admirable and realistic, his understanding of things based on the principle that even “if you cannot pluck up bad ideas by the root,” learned and virtuous people “must not therefore abandon the commonwealth.” He believes in working by tact and indirection, that “what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible.”⁴⁴ What is being tested in the debate on service, then indirectly in Book 2, is the story of Ciceronian primitivism: the orator who is able to bring about good government and civility through persuasion alone. Along with the original creation of the island, the singular Utopus leads a rude people to civilization, just as Cicero’s original leader “through reason and eloquence . . . transformed [the others] from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.”⁴⁵ The rhetorical games are not simply a way of wiping away the feigned reality of Utopia, but are in fact the means of achieving the society at which the fiction aims.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Utopia*, 34.

⁴⁵ Cicero, *De Inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 7.

⁴⁶ The humanist conception of the persuasive orator as the foundation of a commonwealth would influence later English colonization efforts. See Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Hythloday's response is penetrating. "In a council, there is no way to dissemble, no way to shut your eyes to things. You must openly approve the worst proposals, and consent to the most vicious policies." Accommodation and tact are far more likely to cause a virtuous advisor to be swallowed up by the evils of the court, one way or another, than to bring about a good outcome. Whether you accede to evil policies for the sake of the play (and your own neck) or preserve your commitment to the truth, "you will be made a screen for the knavery and folly of others": an understanding of societies based more on Lucretian, or Machiavellian, origins. Manipulation works the other way as well, and it would be foolish to imagine that the powers of rhetoric always outmatch the powers of power. "Influencing policy indirectly! You wouldn't have a chance."⁴⁷

Even in Book 1, then, More participates in a manner of speculation about the earliest ages of prehistory to which Renaissance humanists were repeatedly drawn, and to which those in his immediate intellectual sphere were especially receptive. Erasmus in particular occupied an important position in the wider circle of dialogue in which *Utopia* participates. More was in regular correspondance with him during these years, including about the publication of *Utopia*, and his *Praise of Folly* and *Adages* are clear and important companions for More's work. Just before the composition of *Utopia*, Erasmus produced a little-known reflection on warfare, *Dulce bellum inexpertis* (1515), which understands war by placing it within a genealogical narrative borne out of the primitivist interest in origins explored in chapter 1.⁴⁸ "Nature" narrates the story,

⁴⁷ *Utopia*, 35.

⁴⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmus Against War*, trans. J. W. Mackail, (Boston: Merrymount, 1907). For More and the context of Erasmian pacifism, see Robert P. Adams, *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, and Vives, on Humanism, War, and Peace, 1496–1535* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1962).

which begins in a Lucretian-Vitruvian-Ciceronian state of nature and progresses by degrees to the brutal and absurd form of modern warfare:

For some time those men that were in the beginning of the world led their lives in woods: they went naked, they had no walled towns, nor houses to put their heads in: it happened otherwhile that they were sore grieved and destroyed with wild beasts. Wherefore with them first of all, men made war, and he was esteemed a mighty strong man, and a captain, that could defend mankind from the violence of wild beasts.⁴⁹

It is notable, again, that the rise of society through a strong man and the desire for security almost perfectly mirrors the coming of culture and civil society through an eloquent leader, that both origins might even coexist.

Humanity's self-defensive violence against animals is the primitive origin of warfare, Erasmus argues, but the absurdity of modern war—his primary subject—is only explicable by looking at the way such practices were cemented into culture over time. Those who defended their communities against beasts gained admiration; pride and status attached to the practices of violence; and warfare was decoupled from its necessity in nature.

And so by reason that this was counted a thing most worthy of praise (for hereof it rose that Hercules was made a god), the lusty-stomached young men began all about to hunt and chase the wild beasts, and as a token of their valiant victory the skins of such beasts as they slew were set up in such places as the people might behold them. Besides this they were not contented to slay the wild beasts, but they used to wear their skins to keep them from the cold in winter. These were the first slaughters that men used: these were their spoils and robberies.⁵⁰

The skins of slain animals became decorative markers of status, ostentatiously displayed and used as clothing, signaling in the reversal of original nakedness a descent into culture and

⁴⁹ Erasmus, 18.

⁵⁰ Erasmus, 18.

corruption. Here, too, are the origins of religion as Hercules is made a god for his deeds.⁵¹ It is a small step, he adds, from killing animals to killing other men. Erasmus, keen to see the madness of the modern world, finds in the most basic necessities of survival and safety the seeds of a culture obsessed with violence. Warfare has become a habit and feature of this culture, a constant threat to the survival and peaceful sociability for which it originally arose, and which *should* be the special province of humanity. Erasmus's appeal to the explanatory power of the primitive origins of humanity is not merely decorative or tendentious, but serves as a way to explain how supposedly rational beings can become so inured to systems that perpetuate harm to themselves. We are comfortable with custom, and will countenance anything once it has been so ingrained.

Erasmus thus widens his critique from the cruelties of warfare to the distorting forces of culture in general. Nature blames the force of custom, which ties honor to warfare and thus obscures its cruelty and irrationality. In thrall to strong men and the fictions that attach to them, humans make war common,

and it might seem to us also a thing monstrous, if custom were not, which hath so great strength in every place: that by custom it was reputed in some countries a much charitable deed if a man would, when his father was very old, first sore beat him, and after thrust him headlong into a pit, and so bereave him of his life, by whom it chanced him to have the gift of life. It was counted a holy thing for man to feed on the flesh of his own kinsmen and friends. . . . Surely there is nothing so ungracious, nor nothing so cruel, but men will hold therewith, if it be once approved by custom.⁵²

To Erasmus, the ills of modernity infiltrate human societies very early, as the necessities of survival are transformed through the allure of property and status and thus grow into monstrous cruelties that cannot even be recognized as cruelty. He sees in the absurd practices of faraway

⁵¹ I discuss this topic further in Chapter 4.

⁵² Erasmus, 18–19.

societies, including the ritual killing of elders and religious cannibalism, the way custom clouds reason and perverts nature. More, we will find, sees similar customs as a means of creating a more totalizing sense of absurdity around human culture. Both, however, find in this primitivist etiology of culture an incredibly useful method for the diagnosis of and cure for modern society's ills.⁵³

The humanists, their eyes always darting to primitive origins, seek to untangle the strands of nature and culture as they work through the ever-present question of the best state of the commonwealth. And the abstract philosophical topics are always intimately related to the humanists' sense of their own lives: the way they think and speak, their learning and style, their relationship to their small coterie and to a wider society, their allegiance to the past, their business as men in the world. In their search for the causes of social ills, "custom" is often to blame. For Hythloday, custom is at fault in the failures of kings' councils, for it makes both kings and court allergic to the necessary, fundamental changes to the practices that have brought them their success. If Hythloday were to propose giving up acquisitive warfare, for example,

they would take refuge in some remark like this: 'The way we're doing it was good enough for our ancestors, and I only hope we're as wise as they were.' . . . As a matter of fact, we have no misgivings about neglecting the best examples they [our ancestors] have left us; but if something better is proposed, we eagerly seize upon the excuse of reverence for times past and cling to it desperately.⁵⁴

Hythloday makes clear in Book 1 that he sees the modern world as Erasmus's "Nature" does: clinging desperately to the perverse encrustations that culture has created over time, no matter how irrational and malignant.

⁵³ Erasmus writes, in a letter to Ulrich von Hutten, "*Utopia* he published with the purposes of showing the reasons for the shortcomings of a commonwealth" in *Utopia*, ed. Logan, 152.

⁵⁴ *Utopia*, 15.

There is more to the critique than the self-interested inertia of princes and counsellors. The heart of Hythloday's challenge is, as he puts it, that society creates thieves and then punishes them for it. The customs of English society, from its laws to its educational and labor systems to its modes of agricultural production and reliance on markets are all to blame in the intractable problem of theft. Theft results from the ill-considered wars discussed in kings' councils, for the maimed soldiers return (having been schooled in state-sanctioned violence and theft) without the opportunity for regular employment. It results from the idle lords who drain their tenants dry through excessive rents and labor, leaving them to steal out of necessity. It results, in a complex and perspicacious account, from the wool trade, for it encourages the enclosures of land that benefit the wealthy few and their sheep at the expense of the poor, who are driven off the land and deprived of work to support themselves. The poor are then subject to the elevated food prices created by the new arrangement that, again, funnels profits to the landed "oligarch[s]."

If you do not find a cure for these evils, it is futile to boast of your justice in punishing theft. Your policy may look superficially like justice, but in reality it is neither just nor practical. If you allow young folk to be abominably brought up and their characters corrupted, little by little, from childhood; and then you punish them as grownups for committing crimes to which their early training has inclined them, what else is this, I ask, but first making them thieves and then punishing them for it?⁵⁵

Hythloday sees clearly the backdrop against which the discussion at Cardinal Morton's takes place, "not long after the revolt of the Cornishmen against the king had been put down, with the miserable slaughter of the rebels."⁵⁶ Without an understanding of this interlocking system along with the willingness to search out the roots of these evils and to tear them out, the problems besetting society will remain. The challenge, moreover, is a decidedly humanist one. Richard

⁵⁵ *Utopia*, 21.

⁵⁶ *Utopia*, 15.

Strier writes that More's revolutionary contribution to the social sciences is this conception of society as a holistic system, and that "More can be seen as taking the great insight of humanist hermeneutics—the importance of taking statements in context—and applying this insight to societies as a whole."⁵⁷ For the humanist's job, as More and Erasmus see it, is to understand social ills as the long-term accretions of culture, and humans as trained into shape by the totality of their social arrangements.

If the roots of these evils are found in humanity's unthinking deference to the past, they are also in their blindness to what would be useful in the past. And if society makes thieves and then punishes them for it, if the shaping power of culture is pervasive and irremediable, then the possibility also exists of transforming for the better both society and the humans it produces. Hythloday's anecdote of the discussion at Cardinal Morton's house is a miniature iteration of what the anthropologist Victor Turner calls a "social drama," a conflictual, agonistic process that makes visible otherwise hidden structures by which a society is organized.⁵⁸ Hythloday's polemic against English society is a "breach," and it forces others—the lawyer, the friar, Morton's counselors—to play out their prescribed social roles, to reveal their allegiances and the limits that come from these attachments. This is precisely what Hythloday intends to show. The counselors fall into their expected roles in the larger play (though we should note that Morton,

⁵⁷ Richard Strier, "Taking Utopia Seriously—and Positively" *Moreana* 54, no. 208 (2017): 141–8. Rebhorn also argues that More's depiction of human nature, the natural order, and the social organization of Utopia is a result of the humanist tradition. Wayne A. Rebhorn, "Thomas More's Enclosed Garden: 'Utopia' and Renaissance Humanism" *English Literary Renaissance* 6, no. 2 (1976): 140–55.

⁵⁸ The concept is first put forward in Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957). See also Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors" in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society. Symbol, Myth, and Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 23–59, and Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 141–68.

surprisingly, does not). We become more aware of individuals' roles in ever-widening spheres of corporate assemblies, in Henry S. Turner's conception. The social drama of king's councils widens to include all of one's social and cultural surroundings. What seems to the character More to be the necessary drama of public life is, in Hythloday's view, "nothing but a conspiracy of the rich."⁵⁹ In *Utopia*, Hythloday is a disharmonic presence, even in the more genial setting of More's garden, and he—along with the provocations of his Utopia—puts into relief the guises people put on, the scripts they follow, to accommodate the larger social drama.

At the end of Book 1, Hythloday introduces Utopia as a society that knows (much better than Europe does) how to make use of the virtues of classical antiquity. With only a few scraps of the knowledge of ancient Rome, gained through a single chance contact, they have been able to glean all the useful inventions and learned how to improve on them. To its shame, the same ability to recognize and use the best of other civilizations is beyond modern Europe. "If a similar accident has hitherto brought anyone here from their land, the incident has been completely forgotten," Hythloday observes, "as it will perhaps be forgotten in time to come that I was ever in their country."⁶⁰ Book 1 primes us to view the island of Utopia as distinctly and ideally humanist in conception. Between the dialogue, the debate on service, the emphasis on the best use of the classical past, and the view of social mores and organization that emerges, *Utopia* thoroughly puts on display the possibilities of humanism, producing through the the two books together one of the most stunning achievements of its way of understanding the world.

III.

⁵⁹ *Utopia*, 95.

⁶⁰ *Utopia*, 37–8.

And yet: it is difficult to come away from *Utopia* with an unqualified sense of humanism's expansive possibilities. Hythloday's instigation of the social drama is not resolved so easily. If attention to More's intellectual surroundings leads us to perceive what is useful in Utopia's example and to think about the betterment of society in a holistic way, it also leads to an awareness of Hythloday's flaws as a rhetorician, the use and misuse of established positions, and the subtle irrationalities of Utopian society. And if we are to see, through our humanist discernment, the limits of limited perspectives, we must also see the ways in which certain varieties of humanistic myopia diminish what Book 2 inspires us to imagine: the world that opens up as Hythloday jolts us from the character More's world and into his own story, a jolt signified by the scale and audaciousness of Utopus's creation of a new island.

While the humanist dialogue envelops and situates the description of Utopia, we should not overlook the feeling that the final rejoinder to Hythloday is a particularly feeble attempt to contain it. The character More, ever the dutiful Ciceronian, puts forward the party line:

I was left thinking that not a few of the customs and laws he had described as existing among the Utopians were quite absurd. . . . My chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and their moneyless economy. This one thing alone takes away all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which (in the popular view) are the true ornaments and glory of any commonwealth.⁶¹

The link between the original foundation of the commonwealth, private property, and true nobility was forged by Cicero and frequently repeated by civic humanists, a perspective that

⁶¹ *Utopia*, 97.

Skinner places at the heart of *Utopia*.⁶² But, after the imaginative flights of Book 2, it is difficult to view “nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty,” “ornaments” and “glory,” and especially the “popular view” without severe skepticism—without the same vertiginous sense that it is *these* customs that are “quite absurd.” We are thrown by this shift of perspective into the pervasive absurdity that, Greenblatt argues, constitutes More’s radical estrangement from not only from political life but “the great body of man’s social relations” in the grip of universal madness.⁶³ And we are thrown into the realm of absurdity by the centrifugal force that carries us to the farthest edge of the world. The character More’s allegiance to the real world that he knows may resonate with our own, yet there is at least a touch of madness in the the idea that, barely two decades after the emergence of a new continent teeming with life, the way things are are the way they must always be. A transformation has taken place. *Utopia* asks the questions posed by one of its prefatory verses: “Do you want to see new marvels now that a new world has been discovered not long ago? Do you want to learn ways of living different in nature from our own?”⁶⁴

In contrast to the closest analogue of the genre of Book 2, Plato’s *Republic*, *Utopia* purports to be a true ethnographic account of a society existing in the New World, encountered on an extension of Vespucci’s real voyages. And yet the humanistic interpretation has so dominated scholarship that More’s engagement with New World ethnography has been

⁶² Cicero in fact writes that the original reason humans banding together in society was “the hope of safeguarding their possessions,” Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 249. See also Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*.

⁶³ *Utopia*, 15.

⁶⁴ Cornelis de Schrijver, “To the Reader,” in *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 213.

minimized beyond all proportion. The thorough and influential critical edition by Hexter and Surtz downplays the New World context in favor of the humanist focus. Hexter, after noting that Vespucci described the inhabitants of the New World as “epicureans” and that their communism must have made More think of the communism of Plato’s *Republic*, will only speculate that “There was not after all in Vespucci’s slim narrative much more than a spark for the imagination.”⁶⁵ Likewise, Surtz concludes that, in terms of influence, the New World is clearly subordinated to the classics: “At any rate, what must always be remembered is that the humanistic system of *Utopia* is highly developed and closer to Greco-Roman civilization than to the simple or occasionally complex culture of a presumed Golden Age in America.”⁶⁶ Slim as Vespucci’s volume is, and important as the humanists’ interest in Greco-Roman civilization is, New World ethnography nevertheless provides much of the still under-explored material that constitutes *Utopia*, and, I argue, is the crucial relationship if we are to understand its full significance.

Utopia attaches itself, first and foremost, to the New World. Ambrosius Holbein’s frontispiece is a “visual quotation” of Columbus’s published letters, according to Shannon Miller, copying its then-unique depiction of a caravel.⁶⁷ “Consequently,” Miller writes, “the *Utopia* is citing from not just one but both of the two major new world discovery texts of the

⁶⁵ J. H. Hexter, “*Utopia* in its Historical Milieu,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, ed. J. H. Hexter and Edward Surtz, vol. 4, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965), xxxi–xxxii.

⁶⁶ Edward Surtz, “Sources, Parallels, and Influences,” in *Complete Works*, vol. 4. clxxxix.

⁶⁷ In fact, the frontispieces to both the first and second editions are visual quotations. *Utopia* and Columbus’s letters are the only texts between 1492–1520 to prominently display a caravel in this way. See Shannon Miller, “Idleness, Humanist Industry, and English Colonial Activity in Thomas More’s ‘fruitfull, pleasant, ‘wittie’ and ‘profitable’ Utopia,” in *Essays in Honor of Richard Helgerson*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 19–50.

period: the visual presence of the Columbus publications quoted in the text's engraving thus complements and compounds the Vespucci references within the opening pages of *Utopia*.⁶⁸ The sample of Utopian language and poetry serve as ethnographic evidence of a different sort.



Letter of Christopher Columbus [*De insulis inuentis*], Swiss School, Basel, 1493.

⁶⁸ *Utopia*, 28.



Thomas More, *Libellus Vere Aureus Nec Minus Salutaris quam Festivus [Utopia]*, Louvain: Arte Theodorici Martini, 1516, British Library, London.

By this time Peter Martyr had begun publishing his *Decades*, in which the descriptions of the New World become fuller and more florid, the evocations of the Golden Age more pronounced. Surtz and Dominic Baker-Smith speculate that More may have known Martyr, but it is far from certain.⁶⁹ Whatever the exact case of influence may be, the most significant pieces of New World writing are vital for *Utopia* in all their complex novelty and in their attachments to older texts.

Critics have not, of course, missed the connection. But the many ways More engages with New World ethnography remains a surprising blindspot in Utopian criticism. To illustrate, in an annotated bibliography of scholarship on *Utopia* from 1950 to 1995, only two percent of

⁶⁹ Surtz, *Complete Works*, vol. 4. cliii–clxxix, clxxix, Dominic Baker-Smith, “Reading Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 152.

the field deals with the New World context in any depth.⁷⁰ These, and work since then, have understandably tended to focus on the text's relationship to colonialism. Jeffrey Knapp, for example, views *Utopia* as a forerunner of English imperialist ideology, containing "perhaps the first Tudor attempt to elaborate a theory of colonization."⁷¹ Peter Herman, also focusing on Utopian conquest, sees More as criticizing European assertions of dominance over Native Americans by patterning his Utopians after Europeans.⁷² Shannon Miller examines the sixteenth-century reception of *Utopia* in the context of English anxieties about their colonial idleness relative to the Spanish and Portuguese, arguing that the work came to be presented as a "prompt for colonizing activity."⁷³ These studies have largely focused on the short passage on the Utopians' *res nullius* justification for colonizing their neighbors, seeing the Utopians first and foremost as thinly-veiled Europeans.

Along a similar line, the colonial legacy of utopias has been a fruitful area of inquiry, and is a crucial part of the story as it unfolds, from Vasco de Quiroga's attempt to model a colony in Mexico on *Utopia* to the broader relationship between utopianism and colonial enterprises.⁷⁴ The

⁷⁰ Albert J. Geritz, *Thomas More: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism, 1935–1997* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 215–309.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Knapp, *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from "Utopia" to "The Tempest"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 21. Even these accounts demur about *Utopia*'s American interests, however. Knapp writes, "As at best a negatively positive response to questions concerning the practical and ethical feasibility of New World colonization, *Utopia* appears almost as resistant to America as the less subtle and extensive contemporary reflections on the subject." Knapp, 25.

⁷² Peter C. Herman, "Who's That in the Mirror? Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Problematic of the New World," in *Opening the Borders: Inclusivity in Early Modern Studies: Essays in Honor of James V. Mirollo*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 116–120.

⁷³ *Utopia*, 33.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Ethan A. Schmidt, "The Well-ordered Commonwealth: Humanism, Utopian Perfectionism, and the English Colonization of the Americas" *Atlantic Studies* 7, no. 3 (2010): 309–28. and Timothy Sweet, "Economy, Ecology, and Utopia in Early Colonial Promotional Literature,"

utopian genre that it spawned has been treated as a whole, sometimes in relation to ethnography, as in Nina Chordas's account of the "quasi-fiction" shared by both genres in the early modern period.⁷⁵ Investigations of the relationship between contemporary ethnography and *Utopia* itself are rare, however, and, as with Alfred A. Cave's identification of the Utopians with colonizing Greeks rather than Vespucci's Native Americans, more often than not interpret More as veering in the opposite direction of contemporary New World writing.⁷⁶ The same can be said of other primitivist models: in a fine essay on the negative orientation of *Utopia*, Richard Helgerson dismisses Utopian resemblances to the simplistically primitive Golden Age and amplifies their departure from the tropes of negative ethnography, arguing instead for a new mode of "secular negative thought."⁷⁷ An exception is Peter Hallberg, who sees the New World connection as the key to More's "anthropological approach to civil scientific study" with an emphasis on social experimentation.⁷⁸ In taking Utopia's New World location as significant, and in understanding it as written to represent a New World culture in a meaningful way, then, we are (strangely) taking something of a departure from the mainstream.

The point of this claim is not, of course, to deny the way humanistic concerns shape *Utopia*, but rather to explore the way these humanist concerns shaped and were shaped by the

American Literature 71, no. 3 (1999): 399–427. For Quiroga, see Dominic Baker-Smith, "Utopia and the Franciscans," in *More's Utopia and the Utopian Inheritance*, ed. A.D. Cousins and Damian Grace, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 37–52.

⁷⁵ Nina Chordas, *Forms in Early Modern Utopia: The Ethnography of Perfection* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

⁷⁶ Alfred A. Cave, "Thomas More and the New World" *Albion* 23, no. 2 (1991): 209–29.

⁷⁷ Richard Helgerson, "Inventing Noplace, or the Power of Negative Thinking," *Genre* 15, no. 2–3 (1982): 101.

⁷⁸ Peter Hallberg, "Thomas More's Cosmopolitan Civil Science: The New World and *Utopia* Reconsidered," *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 4 (2012): 578–606.

New World, and to view *Utopia* as a profound exploration of their entanglement. These first New World texts share a strong tendency toward “negative ethnography,” described above, to such an extent that it can be said to be the primary rhetorical means by which Europeans first imagined the inhabitants of the New World. The best-known expression of this genre comes from Montaigne’s essay “Of cannibals,” in a passage later lifted by Shakespeare, describing the Tupinamba of Brazil:

This is a nation . . . In which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat.⁷⁹

Negative ethnography’s rhetorical strategy seems to operate according to our most basic perceptions of difference. How does one define others? They do not do the things we do. It is therefore no surprise that the convention is of long-standing, and that it is by no means unique to European ethnography. The recorded European origin is likely Hesiod’s myth of Prometheus in his *Works and Days*—as Margaret Hodgen notes, the “initial speculation in Western literature concerning the original condition of mankind.”⁸⁰ This “scheme of cultural classification” is a mode familiar from the humanist primitivism of the previous chapter, is visible behind Erasmus’s speculations about early humanity above, and closely associated with *Utopia*’s

⁷⁹ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 153.

⁸⁰ Hodgen argues that this negative description grew out of a sixteenth-century desire for clarity and verisimilitude: “The use of European custom as a touchstone of communication,” however, created a formula that utilized European analogs from native customs wherever possible and, when no analogs could be found, had to “resort to negation.” Hodgen, 196–7.

explicit models, including Tacitus's *Germania* and two authors Hythloday takes with him on his journey, Herodotus and Thucydides.⁸¹

This negative ethnography, however, entered the Renaissance imaginary with renewed vitality through descriptions of the New World, where many of the speculations about the original conditions of society *did*, to the wonder of observers, seem to really exist.⁸² In the brief account of Columbus's initial encounter with the Indigenous Taíno, he records a few of their most notable attributes: they have no clothes, no weapons, no iron, and no religion. Each of these features posed extraordinary challenges to European assumptions about the necessary constitutive features of society. Did the people they encountered not feel post-lapsarian shame at nakedness? Were their bodies less susceptible to the elements than clothed Europeans? Did they not know the regular state of war that Europeans had become used to?

Vespucci, too, follows the usual taxonomy when describing the Indigenous peoples of the New World. Passages from different letters illustrate the conspicuous mode of negative ethnography that characterizes the accounts More would have read:

They have no cloth, either of wool, flax, or cotton, because they have no need of it; nor have they any private property, everything being in common. They live amongst themselves without a king or ruler, each man being his own master, and having as many wives as they please. . . . They have no temples and no laws, nor are they idolaters. What more can I say! They live according to nature, and are more inclined to be Epicurean than Stoic.

We did not find that these people had any laws; they cannot be called Moors nor Jews, but worse than pagans. For we did not see that they offered any sacrifices, nor have they any place of worship. I judge their lives to be Epicurean. Their

⁸¹ Hodgen, 178. See also Rhiannon Evans, *Utopia Antiqua: Readings of the Golden Age and Decline at Rome* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁸² The New World association with negative ethnography proved tenacious, in fact, and has been claimed as the foundation of American literature by Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964, rpt. 2000), as well as Terence Martin, "The Negative Structures of American Literature," *American Literature*, 57 no. 1 (1985): 1–22.

habitations are in common. . . . They have no commerce, and neither buy nor sell. In conclusion, they live, and are content with what nature has given them.⁸³

This is, of course, not all Vespucci has to say about the people he encounters, but it does quickly mark out what he found most immediately noteworthy about them. He views them as inhabiting a primitivist state of nature of a type already extensively imagined, not least by his humanist contemporaries. They live according to nature, which does not include law or even religion. Everything that structures Vespucci's recognizable society seems to be missing: national or provincial boundaries, king and lord—indeed the whole concept of hierarchical political authority—law, religion, and private property. He pays attention to the materials they lack, most significantly iron but also materials for clothing. He is particularly enticed by the way this freedom from social structures encourages sexual promiscuity without judgment. And he marvels at the fact that, with no concept of private property and few goods, they do not seem to participate in trade: “In conclusion, they live, and are content with what nature has given them.”

This is only a rudimentary ethnography: unreliable, sensationalist, resting on preexisting constructs rather than anything approaching clear-eyed observation. Its main purpose is to indicate an extreme distance from European culture, not to understand the real culture on the other side. European ethnography of Indigenous New World peoples would not stay this way, as the experience of entanglement rapidly increased over the next decades and centuries, but neither would it entirely shake the way of looking encapsulated here. The account contains not only the formulaic negative ethnography, however, but also a series of provocative observations about other elements of New World cultures. Vacillating between disgust, admiration, and curiosity,

⁸³ *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci*, 46–47, 9. The authenticity of these letters, and Vespucci's travels, has been disputed. See Luciano Formisano, Introduction to *Amerigo Vespucci, Letters from a New World: Amerigo Vespucci's Discovery of America*, ed. Formisano, trans. David Jacobson, (New York: Marsilio, 1992), xxviii–xxxv.

Vespucci records details about piercings, ritual castration, and cannibalism, judgements about their health, diet, and appearance that go beyond generalizing convention and evoke a textured world of difference through the observation of particularities. The admired qualities (their incredible strength in swimming and skill in archery, their surprising physical beauty) commingle with repellant barbarisms “beyond all human credibility” (cannibalism, various religious errors, a practice of deforming men’s penises). The mix of the ideal and the savage, together with the model of negative ethnography, constitute the basic impulses by which Europeans wrote about the New World from their very first attempts.

The crux is between nature and culture. “they live, and are content with what nature has given them,” he writes, and is consistently interested in what it means to be content with nature, what it is like to pursue pleasure without the usual restrictions of law and religion. Searching for analogues among his humanistic learning, Vespucci turns to Lucretian primitivism and the ancient philosophy it expressed: “I judge their lives to be Epicurean.” The unbounded pursuit of pleasure takes the form, most obviously in this account, of the “immoderate lust” and “indiscriminate coupling” they display, and even more so the fact that they do not seem to feel even the most basic and seemingly natural impulses that attend sexual relations as Europeans conceive of them. In his report the women are as promiscuous as the men, and yet “they are not very jealous,” nor do they feel any shame. That is, the natural human desires they follow are recognizable, yet their experience of pleasure is different, almost unimaginable. Elsewhere Vespucci claims that “the wealth that we enjoy in this our Europe and elsewhere, such as gold, jewels, pearls, and other riches, they hold as nothing, and although they have them in their own lands, they do not labour to obtain them, nor do they value them.” The nature of their desires has

been given shape by the conditions of negative ethnography, most of all the absence of a concept for private property, “everything being in common.”

Utopians, Hythloday reports, are also Epicureans, for “they seem overly inclined to the view of those who think that all or most human happiness consists of pleasure.” They take “pleasure and happiness as their ultimate end” and believe “nature herself prescribes for us a joyous life, in other words, pleasure, as the goal of our actions; and living according to her prescriptions is to be defined as virtue.” They are thus associated at once with the wise philosophers of antiquity and the populations apparently living under such conditions in the New World.⁸⁴ Many have understood the similarities to stop there. The Utopians, after all, have created a complex civilization that stands in contrast to the primitive lives portrayed by Vespucci. Alfred A. Cave, in one of the only essays to focus on More’s response to New World ethnography, argues that the few similarities there are between Vespucci’s natives and More’s are “both superficial and misleading” and that More created the Utopians as antithetical to Vespucci’s depictions of savages who are “worse than animals.”⁸⁵ More instead locates the descriptions of barbarism on the outskirts of *Utopia*, while the Utopians themselves are more intelligible as Greek colonists than Native Americans. In this view, Utopia is civilization relative to the barbarous nations of its part of the world, recreating the dichotomy according to which Vespucci and others write about the New World.

Yet setting up this antithesis between Utopia and the familiar accounts of New World societies is also severely misleading. To see Utopia as a simple recreation of the civil/savage

⁸⁴ On epicureanism in *Utopia*, see Stephen Greenblatt, “Utopian Pleasure,” in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 305–20.

⁸⁵ Cave, 213.

dichotomy is to ignore the many indications that the negative ethnography of Vespucci and others lies at the heart of Utopian society, that its position at the pinnacle of civilization is not in fact separable from its representation as a primitive society. It is true, though, that Utopia seems to occupy a latter position on an assumed scale of cultural development that More ties to geography. After leaving Vespucci, Hythloday describes their progress away from the barbarous equatorial zone, “grim and uncultivated, inhabited by wild beasts, serpents, and also by men no less wild and dangerous than the beasts themselves. But as you go on, conditions gradually grow milder. The sun is less fierce, the earth greener, the creatures less savage.”⁸⁶ As he passes through these “wild” and “uncultivated” regions, the people he meets inhabit progressively more advanced societies. They encounter people who carry out commerce, first with flat-bottomed vessels and then with ships “in every respect like our own.” Travel, here, is a way of tracing long genealogies. And, as for Erasmus, that genealogy makes clear the many pitfalls along the way. Hythloday shows one society the use of the compass, “of which they had been ignorant.” What seems an advantage, however, breeds dangerous overconfidence, and “this device, which they thought would be so advantageous to them, may become the cause of much mischief.”⁸⁷ Utopia exists at the far end of this journey, true, but the source of wonder is less its advancement than that it has avoided the pitfalls and corruptions of civilization, that it has retained its primitive core.

The concept of the primitive that emerges between humanism and New World ethnography, and its move to the center of importance for thinking about culture, allows for a set of simple and naïve descriptions to become, in More’s hands, the basis for a fully realized social

⁸⁶ *Utopia*, 12.

⁸⁷ *Utopia*, 13.

system. In its basic outlines, Hythloday's account of Utopia follows the taxonomic organization of negative ethnography to a remarkable degree. The root of the Utopian system, Hythloday repeatedly claims, is its lack of private property. Neither do the Utopians have currency or respect for gold, silver, and jewels. They have no kings, nor a tiered social hierarchy remotely recognizable to Europeans. They lack printing until Hythloday introduces them to it. There is no enforced religion, no fixed residencies, no inheritance, and very few laws. The religion they do have is imagined as primitive: some sects worship the sun or moon, and many have set up distinguished men as gods; religion does not, moreover, exercise much constraint. Although they do not go naked they eschew all but the most basic clothing. Violence and war are almost unheard of. They have an abundance of leisure, and they live easily on what nature provides. None of these facets of identity, of course, remains uncomplicated in the text. This outline does not do justice to the intricate workings of Utopian life, rendered by More with careful attention to detail, but neither are the surprising details of Utopia possible without the governing primitivist impulse. As Hythloday reports, pleasure and virtue are understood as "living according to nature," and the whole society, in all its complexity, is an expression of that primitivist principle.⁸⁸

Hythloday marks out the Utopians' lack of property as the defining feature of their way of life, the most drastic departure from his European friends' assumptions about how societies work. And indeed the absence of any concept of private property was the most astounding feature of New World societies. Peter Martyr, writing just before More wrote *Utopia*, describes an idealized vision of the native culture encountered by Columbus: "For it is certain, that among

⁸⁸ *Utopia*, 60.

them, the lande is as common as the sun and water: and that mine and thine (the seedes of all mischief) have no place with them.”⁸⁹ Hythloday launches the work out of the dialogue of Book I into the ethnography of Book II by declaring that private property is so ingrained into European culture that no reform is possible short of tearing the concept of private property out at the roots:

Thus I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely done away with, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can the business of mortals be happily conducted. As long as private property remains, by far the largest and best part of the human race will be oppressed by a heavy and inescapable burden of cares and anxieties.⁹⁰

The bedrock of Utopia, according to Hythloday, is its lack of property, the principle from which all other Utopian principles arise. Its pleasures and achievements are to be seen as an extension of this feature, a characteristic that is, significantly, an absence.

The description of Book 2 is a way of letting the game play out, creating a full view of what it would look like to live in a society founded on the abolition of property. The Utopians’ houses are not their own, and so families must move at regular intervals to guard against developing attachments. Their doors remain unlocked and open to all. With no concept of wealth, there is no inheritance. Everyone eats the same food at one communal dining hall. Even the positions of leadership come with no material advantage. In this way *Utopia* retains its primitive core while upholding its status as the highest example of culture. The lack of inheritance, for example, keeps families in a perpetually rudimentary state, cutting off the possibility of establishing differentiated identities and hierarchies over long timescales before they can be established. Greenblatt explains these features of Utopia as a program for the denial

⁸⁹ Pietro Martire d’ Anghiera, *The Decades of the Newe Worlde Or West India*, trans. Richard Eden, (London: Guilhelmi Powell for Edward Sutton, 1555), 17. I have modernized the spelling.

⁹⁰ *Utopia*, 36.

of the individual: differentiated private selves are tied, More understood, to private property, and so the abolition of property is a means toward the radical self-cancellation More imagined to be an escape from the constant self-fashioning required by engagement in the world.⁹¹ These anti-individualistic mechanisms also amount to a pervasive denial of culture. The uniformity of cities and houses, the enforced detachment from them as expressions of particular identities—of individual, family, and city—keep the “splendor” and “ornament” of Morus’s rejoinder from becoming the absurd identifying marks of civilization. They have managed to arrange things so that the sources of pride and avarice in Erasmus’s genealogy of culture never take hold—indeed, they can hardly even be contemplated.⁹²

From one perspective all this requires an incredible effort; from another it is the most basic arrangement possible. Commonwealths are formed in order to better meet the basic necessities of humans’ natural state: to secure sustenance, shelter, and safety through cooperation. By their system of universal employment, rationalized agriculture, and the absence of accumulated wealth, the Utopians have created *abundance*, and they have created it with relative ease. As there is no class of idle aristocrats, either to rely on the labors of the workforce or to demand the production of elaborate luxuries, and as women work as well as men, a six-hour workday suffices to meet and in fact far exceed the needs of the whole society. It is not only a question of logistical efficiency, but rather one of psychological fashioning. Their happiness is

⁹¹ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 44–5.

⁹² James Simpson notes that one of the key features is its apparent lack of historical development, either in its past or future, despite its 1760 year history. *Utopia*’s vision of the ideal comes from its having “escaped the predations of history”; even the self-negating names “preserve the island intact from any trace of actual history.” Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 232–3.

that of a primitive state, the kind supposedly achieved by the Taíno, whom Peter Martyr claims inhabit a “golden world”:

Surely if they had received our religion, I would think their life most happy of all men if they might therewith enjoy their ancient liberty. A few things content them, having no delight in such superfluities, for the which in other places men take infinite pains and commit many unlawful acts, and yet are never satisfied, whereas many have too much, and none enough.⁹³

It is the condition of Europeans never to be satisfied, whereas native rejection of “superfluities” allows them to live at “ancient liberty.” Without the specter of scarcity, the Utopians’ desires may be shaped so that fear of want and pride of possession never take root.

The arrangement explains Hythloday’s bewildered repulsion at contemporary conditions in England and other European nations. Why are they universally unable to provide the bare necessities for which a commonwealth is originally formed? Why do they fail while even New World peoples seemingly living close to a state of nature have succeeded in creating abundance for all? In England, Hythloday reports, the inequality of wealth creates want, which creates crime, which creates fear and results in barbaric social controls. Society creates thieves and then punishes them for it, and the punishments only serve to further entrench the fears and inequalities that create the thieves. This process of immiseration is, perversely, the same one that leads to what Europeans have come to see as their cultures’ great points of pride: the “nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty” that attend civilization. Pride, “that serpent from hell that twines itself around the hearts of men,” in fact *depends* on the link between the glory of commonwealths and the poverty of the great mass of their members; “Pride would not condescend even to be made a goddess, if there were no wretches for her to sneer at and

⁹³ d’ Anghiera, *The Decades of the Newe Worlde*, trans. Eden, 8. I have modernized the spelling.

domineer over.”⁹⁴ What Utopia proposes is a social system that shapes human hearts in favor of a radically different conception of pleasure and virtue than has taken hold in Europe, while guarding against a system that breeds pride about the heart.

As with this understanding of the social world as linked together in complex patterns, the abolition of private property creates ripple effects throughout Utopia. Natural human desires are shaped by producing enough and eliminating scarcity, as with the apportioning of food and other goods:

There is plenty of everything, and no reason to fear that anyone will claim more than he needs. For why would anyone be suspected of asking for more than is needed, when he knows there will never be any shortage? Fear of want, no doubt, makes every living creature greedy and rapacious, and man, besides, develops these qualities out of sheer pride, which glories in getting ahead of others by a superfluous display of possessions. But this sort of vice has no place whatever in the Utopian scheme of things.⁹⁵

The principle is simple enough: fear of want creates greed, human pride is fed by inequality of goods, and so providing enough gives form to human nature.⁹⁶ But the implications of such thinking are vast. If the concept of private property is done away with, the creation of wealth must be resisted in all its forms. The animal skins that quickly become clothing and signs of glory in Erasmus’s early society allow status to creep in and infect the rest. In Utopia, the clothing is as simple as possible, cloaks “of the same color, which is that of natural wool.”⁹⁷ The express reason is to cut off the self-aggrandizing fantasies of culture that steer societies away

⁹⁴ *Utopia*, 96.

⁹⁵ *Utopia*, 50.

⁹⁶ Strier also sees the creation of abundance as proof that the creation of certain types of people is the key Utopian principle. On the above “peace of mind,” characteristic of Epicurean and Stoic thought, he writes, “This state of mind can be seen as the goal and the rationale of the key Utopian *institutio*.” Strier, 146.

⁹⁷ *Utopia*, 48.

from the dictates of nature. “As far as a garment’s usefulness goes, what does it matter if it was woven of fine thread or coarse? Yet [those who wear fine clothes] act as if they were set apart by nature herself, rather than their own fantasies,” going on to locate such reasoning as the foundation of arbitrary social hierarchies and the esteem of noble blood, fictions as insubstantial as the worship of useless gold. “No matter how delicate the thread, they say, a sheep wore it once, and still was nothing but a sheep.”⁹⁸

Gold poses a similar threat to the system, and requires a more concerted resistance to keep Utopian society close to its primitive condition. And so More goes further, seemingly inspired by Vespucci’s New World report of people who “do not value gold, nor pearls, nor gems, nor such other things as we consider precious here in Europe. In fact they almost despise them, and take no pains to acquire them.”⁹⁹ This is the Utopians’ view, for they rate gold according to its usefulness and find it the least useful of metals. This seems to Hythloday profoundly reasonable, especially in contrast to the rest of the world where man, who gives gold its meaning, is treated “as if he were personally attached to the coins, and a mere appendage to them.”¹⁰⁰

Given their reasoning, it would make sense for Utopians to forego the use of gold. Yet this is not the case: gold in fact plays a major and visible role in Utopian life. It is the center of a society-wide ritual in which everyone who uses a chamber pot participates. That is, the Utopians’ “stores of gold” and other precious metals are neither stored nor done away with, but are used to

⁹⁸ *Utopia*, 57.

⁹⁹ Vespucci, *The Cosmographiae Introductio of Martin Waldseemüller*, trans. Joseph Fischer and Edward Burke, ed. Charles Herbermann, (New York: U.S. Catholic Historical Society, 1908), 98.

¹⁰⁰ *Utopia*, 58.

shackle slaves with chains of gold, or be forged into chamber pots. In fact, “they hold gold and silver up to scorn in every conceivable way.”¹⁰¹ Richard Halpern argues that “the ritual debasement of gold is in some ways the quintessentially Utopian act . . . [for] it manifests the cultural origin of all values and thus underwrites the Utopian project as a whole.”¹⁰² He emphasizes the incredible irrationality of the Utopian system: if the Utopians’ practices were dictated by use-value, it would be profoundly unreasonable to repeatedly cast gold chamber pots and chains, then confiscate those useful objects and recast them into currency whenever the gold is needed during wartime.

And why do the Utopians have gold for chamber pots in the first place? Why does what first appears to be a feature of negative ethnography morph into something like its opposite—the ubiquitous use of gold in the fabric of Utopian society? In practical terms, there is gold in Utopia because the Utopians trade for it. We are told that, through trade with other nations, the Utopians receive “such goods as they lack at home,” though that category is immediately reduced to include almost nothing, since “in fact, about the only important thing they lack is iron.” Their largest imports, then, are the “immense quantities of gold and silver” procured from this trade, by which they have accumulated an enormous treasury.¹⁰³ The paradox here is conscious and

¹⁰¹ *Utopia*, 55.

¹⁰² Halpern reads this as a desire that must be repressed, and Utopia not as rational system but as reflection of England in which England represents the unconscious with respect to Utopia. Louis Marin also basis his influential Marxist-Freudian reading on the irrational, subtly contradictory aspects of Utopia. Halpern, Jameson, and Hogan offer further productive Marxist interpretations of *Utopia*. Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 145, Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath, (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1984), Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), and Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse,” *Diacritics* 7, no. 2 (1977): 2–21, Hogan, *Other Englands*.

¹⁰³ *Utopia*, 54.

conspicuous: “they have accumulated a vast treasure; but they do not keep it like a treasure.” Neither do their exports seem all that justified. In exchange for the foreign gold and silver used to maintain their vast treasury, the Utopians trade their surplus agricultural goods, including “grain, honey, wool, flax, timber, scarlet and purple dyestuffs, hides, wax, tallow, and leather, as well as livestock.” Yet again and again the spareness of Utopian life is maintained, making its abundance of goods unnecessary. Why produce “scarlet and purple dyestuffs” if all Utopian cloaks are “of the same color, which is that of natural wool”?¹⁰⁴ It is not because work itself is virtuous: officials “never force their citizens to perform useless labor,” and leisure, such as it exists in Utopia, is valued above work. Something is going on here.

The key points of Utopian commerce create an unfamiliar system, as if it is designed to subvert the forces that make commerce necessary: they create goods they do not need in exchange for gold they actively disdain. They go to great lengths to accumulate this treasury and rehearse its debasement. Why? For one thing, the Anemolian ambassador episode shows the Utopian use of gold to be a useful mechanism for resisting a human tendency to invest undue cultural value in things, thus introducing the desire for private property.¹⁰⁵ The purpose of the gold chamber pot ritual, then, is not simply to align Utopian culture with nature but also to expose and continually keep in view the arbitrary fictionality of culture. The vast stores of gold and silver in Utopia also play a key role in the holistic ecology of Utopian society. That is, the gold exists as a way to resist the reality of Utopian commerce, as well as to maintain their claims to avoid war, excessive labor, laws, and inequality. Both the material abundance and cultural

¹⁰⁴ *Utopia*, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Here we get a sense of the always precarious nature of the custom, for if gold were used for “plate-ware and such handiwork . . . the people would not want to give up such articles, on which they had begun to fix their hearts.” *Utopia*, 55.

indifference of the Utopian economic system are crucial to its goal of creating the widespread, sustained happiness enjoyed by those closest to nature. In Europe, the cultural reliance on pride and splendor has created a system that cannot produce enough for the great many, while the material scarcity itself reinforces the grotesque cultural values. In Utopia, the cultural attitudes allow for the production and distribution of enough, and more than enough, such that cultural values are shaped by abundance rather than scarcity.

More's attention is drawn repeatedly to the bridge between the ideal world of Utopia and the flawed world it is supposed to inhabit. The Utopians may still be said to inhabit a kind of primitivist golden world because they are largely indifferent to the system as an economy: "They now care very little whether they sell for cash or on credit, and most payments actually take on the form of promissory notes . . . most of [which], in fact, is never claimed."¹⁰⁶ Practically the only end toward which the Utopians trade, it turns out, is to store up the gold and silver to use as payment, at extravagant rates, for mercenaries. And this, in turn, is only to avoid war to the extent possible. Hythloday's claim that "they despise war as an activity fit only for beasts," and "go to war only for good reasons," as a last resort, is not quite true.¹⁰⁷ Their reluctance is quickly undercut by the ever-widening sphere of offenses toward which military action is considered an appropriate response. In the real geopolitical world they inhabit, war is justified by nearly any offense toward the Utopians and their allies; the result should be perpetual war.

Yet despite the range and magnitude of violence the Utopians deem appropriate, the principle of restraint and essential peacefulness remains paramount. They go far out of their way to avoid actually feeling the effects of war themselves. The Utopians use their stores of gold and

¹⁰⁶ *Utopia*, 54.

¹⁰⁷ *Utopia*, 77.

silver, at first resort, to pay others to assassinate the most powerful and therefore most responsible for the breach. If that fails, the Utopians sow discord or provoke challenges from other claimants to foreign thrones. What looks to the rest of the world like dishonorable subterfuge—as Hythloday puts it, “the cruel villainy of a degenerate mind”—is a way to ward off the insanity of war: the only rational course of action.¹⁰⁸ The relative lack of war is accomplished not by inhabiting an impossible fantasy world, but by eschewing the values of pride, avarice, ambition, valor, and so on that come from the perversities of culture. They readily take a course that is elsewhere deemed dishonorable but which allows them to avoid the horrors of war. A small price to pay, and one inconceivable to Europeans.

More’s goal is to create a society that has broken free from the strictures of scarcity, wealth, property, and their concomitant social ills. It is not so simple as it appears in negative ethnography, but the complex system More creates is nevertheless a concerted expression of this ethnography: partly the negation of one’s expectations for what is necessary, partly the holistic account of a culture through its practices and institutions. For what emerges from this experiment, as Strier argues, is More’s profound sense that society is an interlinked system, that humans are malleable according to the pressures and influences of their culture.¹⁰⁹ It is the ethnographic character of the negative description of the ideal that primes us to see More’s project this way. And, it is fair to speculate, it is the ethnography of the New World, thin and incomplete as it was then, that nevertheless primed More to construct *Utopia* as he did. We might add to Strier’s insight that More’s way of thinking about social problems “holistically,” as

¹⁰⁸ *Utopia*, 79.

¹⁰⁹ Strier argues that “One of the deep premises of *Utopia* is that human nature is malleable, that it is conditioned by social circumstances.” Strier, 147.

part of “a conception of a society as a system” is at least as much the result of his encounter with the ethnography of the New World as it was a result of the humanist practice of situating things in historical context. The two discourses, we have seen, mold and reinforce each other. The laws in Utopia are both few and simple, Hythloday claims, not because it is a fantasy of a world without restraints, but because its citizens have been shaped by their culture to act without the compulsion of the law. This is the result of the humanists’ primitivist impulse to search out origins, the impulse behind behind Erasmus’s genealogical story of warfare. More’s Utopia is one of the first and best attempts to transfer the full power of these speculations to understanding the significance of the New World just then appearing on the horizon.

The unmistakable push and pull of *Utopia*, felt in the quick oscillation between what is to be hoped for and what to be expected, between the assertion of reality and the sweeping away of fiction, dramatizes the coexisting view of humans as thoroughly malleable, the product of arbitrary and artificial culture, and rooted in nature, subject to deep, inborn origins. That is, Utopians are created to exist on the knife’s edge between a primitive natural condition and one subject to the forces of culture that transform the earliest societies into complex civilizations existing far away from their original state. The paradoxical situation is visible even in brief, strange details, such as the “forest which they uprooted with their own hands and moved to another site” or their method of raising chickens by incubation and imprinting, for “As soon as they come out of the shell, the chicks recognize the humans, follow them around, and are devoted to them instead of to their mothers.”¹¹⁰ The original founding of Utopia reverberates throughout the society and down the ages. Utopus creates an island by a tremendous act of

¹¹⁰ *Utopia*, 67, 40.

artifice, only to put in motion a kind of state of nature made possible by the island. What More creates in *Utopia* is not simply a world of favorable conditions, but a conception of culture in which nature and art, nature and culture are bound up together without ever being seamlessly joined. It is not that humans are infinitely pliable and that human nature is powerless against art, (More knows that some bad impulses will prove irremediable, and has repeat adulterers, for example, executed), but rather that “human nature,” understood as having origins in a natural state, is in fact proof of nature’s shaping power as well as humanity’s susceptibility to such influence.

The full weight of this proposition is communicated by the shock of the new that is *Utopia*’s prevailing feature. That shock is, moreover, a feature drawn from New World ethnography. More’s strategy is to be found in the ways his created world rattles the foundations of what is assumed to be natural. For Vespucci, the point of his ethnography was to emphasize a marvelous distance between the culture he wrote about and the culture for whom he wrote, based on creating a psychic disjunction. The natives’ sexual promiscuity and nakedness are surprising not because these are outside the bounds of European imagination, but because of their lack of natural shame—an experience assumed (on biblical authority) to be universal: “Yet there no one cares, for the same impression is made on them at seeing anything indecent as is made on us at seeing a nose or mouth.”¹¹¹ This nakedness might plausibly imply their salacious hedonism, their prelapsarian innocence, or both. The same impulse to surprise and unsettle can be glimpsed behind Vespucci’s descriptions of “inhuman” customs, particularly their cannibalism, and most particularly when the view is comically reversed: “They were astonished at us when we told

¹¹¹ *Utopia*, 9.

them that we did not eat our enemies.”¹¹² Negative ethnography is not just an expression of an ideal, but is a strategy for creating shock at difference, provoking a sense of the absurd that is at once amusing, troubling, and, as an imaginative space that can do no harm, freeing.

Like Vespucci, Columbus, and other ethnographers, More often creates this sense of absurdity around practices that are most recognizable as culture, the product of customs that differ from place to place. Hythloday warns his audience that they are likely to find the Utopians’ marriage customs “foolish and absurd in the extreme,” since, he relates, “Whether she is a widow or a virgin, the woman is shown naked to the suitor by a responsible and respectable matron; and similarly, some respectable man presents the suitor naked to the woman.”¹¹³ There is something of the surprise of New World nakedness and the natives’ lack of shame in this detail, for we recognize the scandal of the idea to Hythloday’s modest European audience even if the Utopians’ reasons are also plain. The satisfying jolt of absurdity works in every direction. Take, for example, a critic writing in 1969 for whom the shock to More’s culture was still apparently alive: “Part of the fun at this level would be the exploration of the limits to which reason can lead a man—like the Utopian practice of bride and groom being seen naked before marriage: the play of reason might lead a man to this notion, but how unreasonable a thing to propose!” If we are amused at seeing this kind of amusement in others, it is only a reflection of what is already present in *Utopia*.¹¹⁴ For More understood perfectly well the way customs can form a totalizing grip on one’s perception while at the same time revealing themselves to be absolutely arbitrary.

¹¹² *Utopia*, 11.

¹¹³ *Utopia*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Richard Schoeck, “‘A Nursery of Correct and Useful Institutions’: On Reading More’s *Utopia* as Dialogue,” *Moreana* 22 (1969): 23.

The “rabbitduck” problem of *Utopia*’s serious and playful natures is, among other things, a way of exposing this perception about the role of culture in human life—the absurdity that comes from the convergence of one’s deeply serious beliefs and the weightless fiction of another’s—and stands in direct relation to More’s thinking about the New World.



Theodor De Bry, c. 1592. In Johann Ludwig Gottfriedt, *Neue Welt vnd americanische Historien*. (Frankfurt: Bey denen Merianischen Erben, 1655), 216. Online facsimile edition, Wisconsin Historical Society.

In the above image, De Bry chooses to depict Vespucci’s first encounter with the inhabitants of Brazil through what seems most startling about their culture. He highlights, in the foreground, their nakedness and sexual customs, as native men offer women to the Europeans, and in the background, two kinds of funerary ritual described in the letters. Along with marriage, Hodgen notes, the rituals surrounding the dispensation of the dead became a major focus of early

modern ethnographic interest.¹¹⁵ On the left, as Vespucci describes, “Some bury their dead with water and food, thinking they will want it.” On the right is a practice that Vespucci describes as “a most barbarous and inhuman kind of interment”:

This is that when a sick or infirm person is almost in the throes of death, his relations carry him into a great wood, and fasten one of those nets in which they sleep to two trees. They put their dying relation into it, and dance round him the whole of one day. When night comes on they put water and food enough for four or six days at his head, and then leave him alone, returning to their village. If the sick man can help himself, and eats and lives so as to return to the village, they receive him with ceremony, but few are those who escape. [Indeed, no one ever visits the sick man after he is abandoned in the woods.]¹¹⁶ Most of them die, and that is their sepulchre.¹¹⁷

It may be that these rites force to the surface, for Europeans, aspects of mortality that cultural rituals are everywhere marshaled to smooth over. Vespucci is horrified by what to him seems incomplete in these rituals: the apparent refusal to demarcate a boundary between life and afterlife through burial; the continued attention to the material, consuming body and seeming indifference to the soul; the casual deference to necessity—food and drink, the course of illness—without any obvious sense of greater meaning. If he is in some respects drawn in by their epicurean ways (the open sexuality of the foreground), the careless approach to death that lurks behind them is a step too far. Most of all, the scenes highlight points of convergence between the natural necessity of death and the ineffectual fictions of culture, an almost casual proximity between nature and human meaning-making in which the latter accepts an ornamental role.

¹¹⁵ Hodgen, 172.

¹¹⁶ This sentence appears in *The Cosmographiae Introductio of Martin Waldseemüller*, trans. Fischer and Burke, ed. Herbermann, 100, but not in the Markham translation.

¹¹⁷ Vespucci, *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci*, trans. and ed. Markham, 10.

There is a faint echo of the above practice in Utopia, where euthanasia and (approved) suicide are presented as the most rational approach to death. Those with terminal illnesses are encouraged to give up their lives; Priests

urge the invalid not to endure such agony any longer. They remind him that he is now unfit for any of life's duties, a burden to himself and to others; he has really outlived his own death. . . . Those who have been persuaded by these arguments either starve themselves to death or, having been put to sleep, are freed from life without any sensation of dying.¹¹⁸

The Utopians' understanding of happiness, their commitment to the commonwealth of all, and their adherence to the dictates of nature, lead them to a set of practices that would seem to most Christians of More's culture "barbarous and inhuman."

Where the Utopian marriage ritual leans toward the light, amusing side of absurdity, the proposal that suicide and euthanasia represent a superior way of life has proved for many to be a far more disturbing prospect. It seems likely that the devout More, especially the More of later Christian polemics, did not actually believe these practices to be the ideal. Something else must be at work. Why raise such astonishingly heterodox ideas in what purports to be the best state of a commonwealth? What accounts for this permissiveness, especially alongside the Utopians' other freedoms, including mutual divorce and their wide (though not unbounded) latitude of religious belief? Skinner sees the Utopian acceptance of suicide as an enlightening wrench in the gears:

Given their view of human happiness, this attitude strikes the Utopians as perfectly reasonable. But it is a case in which their reliance on reason alone, without the benefit of Christian revelation, leads them seriously astray. Although they have no means of knowing it, the actions they regard as pious and honourable are at once mortal sins and a negation of an important aspect of Christian soteriology.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Utopia*, 71.

¹¹⁹ Skinner, 151.

This is a version of a solution pioneered by R. W. Chambers, sometimes called the “Catholic interpretation,” that Utopia represents the best state that reason alone, unassisted by revelation, can achieve. The “heathen virtues” are enough to raise Utopia to a level that should inspire shame in Christian nations—like Virgil leading Dante part-way up Mount Purgatory—though obviously are not to be looked to as an example of perfection.¹²⁰

But this solution, in my view, makes *Utopia* into something far smaller than it seems to be. The moments at which we realize the guardrails have fallen away are there not to curtail the wide-ranging journey that has taken us far beyond the usual horizons, but precisely to capture the feeling of exposure. At these moments More brings the principles that make Utopian life happy and well-governed right up to the edge of what is, to his various audiences through the ages, almost beyond permissible contemplation. This convergence of the ideal and the unspeakable might account for the many points of tension that have long troubled readers with the sense that, even if this is indeed a kind of ideal commonwealth, it would in many ways be torture to live there. The pressure points have shifted, though (remarkably) have not disappeared: we are more likely to feel the same discomfort about the severe prohibition on denying the immortality of the soul than about the radical freedom of religion, or find unconscionable the execution of repeat adulterers rather than the acceptance of divorce. These knots that emerge over and over in the text are a reflection of an ethnographic tradition that oscillates so quickly between the monstrous and the ideal, Golden Age and savagery. And this feeling of tension is why these moments can seem alternately troubling and eye-opening, the reason *Utopia* is still so fun to puzzle through.

¹²⁰ The differences between Utopia and the Church “follow, inevitably, from the postulate that Utopia is a ‘philosophical city’ grounded upon reason alone: the Utopians, ignorant of revelation, naturally have views on worship, asceticism, suicide, and divorce which differ from those of the orthodox in the Middle Ages.” R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 263.

The feeling of unexpected exposure, so central to *Utopia*, is an iteration of the same absurdity about which Hythloday repeatedly warns his audience. And that absurdity is manifestly, consciously brought about by the ethnographic distance that structures the text. “You should have been with me in Utopia,” Hythloday says to More, “and seen with your own eyes their manners and customs as I did.” The character More cannot understand Utopian life in full because he had not seen it himself. The ethnographic quality with which More is playing here is not, of course, only found in first-hand New World writing; it is also crucial to the Renaissance humanists’ obsession with antiquity. Not long before *Utopia* was written, Polydore Vergil included a survey of burial practices in his search for the origins of various arts, inventions, and practices, *On Discovery* (1499). The Persians dragged their dead by a large bird or dog before burial; the Massagets and Derbicae ate their elders, “thinking it better that they dine on them rather than the worms”; the Tibareni honor their beloved elders by hanging them on gibbets. “The Hyperboreans thought that this best kind of burial was this: When people felt themselves tired of life, they should dine and anoint themselves and then go to a particular cliff and throw themselves into the depths of the sea.”¹²¹ The variety and startling reversals of this catalogue (which goes on) are disorienting, prompting a certain estrangement from one’s deeply held values and at least a slight suspension from one’s patterns of thought. The collection of customs here works similarly to the mechanism of negative ethnography: *we* bury our dead out of respect, and thus do not allow their bodies to be desecrated; *they* respect their dead by what we think of as desecration. The inversions in this ethnography, however, are not quite the same as negation (*they* do not bury their dead). One moves laterally, the other tends to move across time. Overlaid

¹²¹ Polydore Vergil, *On Discovery*, ed. Brian P. Copenhaver, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 413, 433.

together, they structure the Renaissance concept of the primitive: both what exists prior to one's own culture and what may be seen in the variety of alien cultures.

More makes use of both diachronic and synchronic ethnography, the New World setting and the humanist orientation toward the past, braiding them together in complex patterns to create an uncommonly powerful concept of the primitive at the heart of *Utopia*. He does so in part by careful attention to the rhetorical effects of ethnography. Not surprisingly, among the small library of classical works Hythloday gives the Utopians is Herodotus, whose remarks on custom illuminate the response to Utopian culture More hopes to achieve.

When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them for what price they would eat their fathers' dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. Then Darius summoned those Indians who are called Callatae, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding through interpreters what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud, that he should not speak of so horrid an act. So firmly rooted are these beliefs; and it is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem that custom is lord of all.¹²²

The absurdity implicit in this anecdote has a governing role in *Utopia*. Custom, at once "lord of all" and endlessly variable, felt to be absolute and revealed to be arbitrary, is not just a subject but the crux of More's conception of his work.

Utopia takes in the full gamut of absurdity offered by ethnography, from winking irony to utter horror at barbaric transgression, and fashions it into a penetrating response to the human world. The Utopians peculiar rituals around gold, at least partly inspired by Vespucci's report, lead to a scene that illustrates the role of ethnographic absurdity. Anemolian ambassadors visit Utopia decked out in gold, jewels, and finery expecting to "dazzle the eyes of the poor Utopians by the glitter of their garb." They are instead, of course, mistaken by the Utopians for slaves, or

¹²² Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), 3.38.

at least “the ambassadors’ fools.”¹²³ The mistake is amusing, and it is a liberating kind of amusement that gently demolishes the hierarchical structures that give form to the society we are used to. The complement to this scene is Hythloday’s detailed ethnography of England, the true den of monsters and savage custom: a whole society organized around perpetual misery and violence, set up to starve masses of people and then string them up on gibbets, a place where the sheep devour the people. Let us recall again Erasmus’s account of custom. Echoing Herodotus, he, or “Nature,” sees ritual murder and cannibalism and concludes, “Surely there is nothing so ungracious, nor nothing so cruel, but men will hold therewith, if it be once approved by custom.”¹²⁴ More wants his readers to see the connection between these faces of the absurd, and he wants them to feel the rooted shock at the “savage and inhuman” in humanity as well as suspended amusement, floating above human folly.

One possible response to the absolute and fictional rule of culture was given voice by Cornelis de Schrijver in his prefatory verse. He sensed, along with the incredible promises of the New World, the most deeply unsettling questions posed by *Utopia*: “Do you want . . . to experience the great emptiness lying concealed at the heart of things?”¹²⁵

If this in some ways reflects More’s response, it does not seem to be taken as a threat. “You have no idea how thrilled I am; I feel so expanded, and I hold my head high,” More writes in a letter to Erasmus, “For in my daydreams I have been marked out by my Utopians to be their

¹²³ *Utopia*, 56.

¹²⁴ Erasmus, 18–19.

¹²⁵ “To the Reader,” in *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 213.

king forever.”¹²⁶ *Utopia* is built from the ironic joining of pride at this elevation (“this soaring pinnacle”) and the leveling Utopian erasure of the concept, the real experience and the ephemeral daydream. As in Hythloday’s tale, the self-negating inversion is hinted in the arrival of ambassadors and sovereigns, “wretched creatures they are,” stupidly prideful in their gold and “empty baubles.” The freedom of this paradoxical movement is what matters, the sense of expansion produced by the imagined vision and the sweeping away. The Utopian flight to the New World brings us, at last, back to the garden in Antwerp. More has stolen a few pleasant hours to engage in humanistic dialogue and inquiry, but he cannot fully escape playing his part as ambassador, the duties of the court and the law that consume his days. The letter continues, “I was going to continue with this fascinating vision, but the rising Dawn has shattered my dream—poor me!—and shaken me off my throne and summons me back to the drudgery of the courts.” The tale ends, like *Utopia*, with the productive friction between More’s “wish” and what he can rather “expect.”¹²⁷ But the expanded feeling *Utopia* creates, in this vision and in itself, is not in fact swallowed up by the return of the real. The ephemeral dream of Utopia envelops the world instead. “But at least this thought gives me consolation: real kingdoms do not last much longer.”

IV.

The realist More, who steps into the drama and plays his part well, inhabits the same fiction as his imaginative creations. Real societies, after all, dissolve as thoroughly as any

¹²⁶ Letter to Erasmus, 4 December 1516, in *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Wegemer and Smith, 280.

¹²⁷ *Utopia*, 97.

Utopia. The discussions in kings' councils are no less constructed than that between the character More and Hythloday. With this statement that brings together the world and Utopia, playfully, as insubstantial dream, we are brought back to two major questions. First, does More mean it? That is, how do we understand a commonwealth that gives wherever we lean our weight? Second, and more broadly, why focus our attention on a piece of fictional, imaginative literature to understand the real world then emerging in the early modern Atlantic? Why look for a better understanding of the New World in what is so conspicuously a kind of "daydream?" These questions are, in fact, related. The problems posed by *Utopia* occupy an immense sphere, much wider than it pretends as a short flight of fancy contained within a slim volume. They were the cracks visible very early on, at least to some, in Europe's encounter with the New World.

There remains the potent challenge that *Utopia* gives wherever we lean our weight; it is a holiday work, a daydream, "(above all) an invention."¹²⁸ But what appears to be the world of dramatic parts in a dialogic play of perspectives, attaching to everything in Utopia and dragging it into the reality of skeptical positions and situated existence, in fact works the other way around. Book 2 envelops Book 1 in *its* fiction. This is partly to concede the point, but it is after all a very good point—we should not underestimate its significance. For both Kinney and Altman, More's *Utopia* is instrumental in developing a humanist poetics, a powerful form of imaginative fiction built on a rhetorical frame. The key is More's decision to locate the ultimate meaning beyond what the dialogic perspectives of the work can resolve. But the significance of *Utopia*'s fiction goes further. For Plato, many of the ills that sprout up in society can be quickly done away with by managing the fictional stories poets tell. Early in *The Republic*'s thought

¹²⁸ Lewis, *English Literature*, 168–9.

experiment, Plato blames the “falsehoods” of poets for letting heretical ideas creep in, and finally casts them out.¹²⁹ For More, fiction clings far more tenaciously to every aspect of reality, particularly to the ones that most insist on their reality. Fictions are, in a very real sense, the stuff from which societies are made.

Utopia is, then, partly a deep reflection on the workings of human society as it exists, partly a reflection on how human ideals are fashioned. Both parts are governed by More’s sense of a totalizing fiction—a web of culture—perhaps the most human of human qualities. It is the best commonwealth he could imagine, where the “imagination” made possible by *Utopia* and its ethnographic fiction is the crux of the exercise—imagination in all its limited capacity and surprising range of movement. If there are reasons to suspect More himself might be appalled if his “best state of the commonwealth” were put into practice in all its details (and there are many built into the text), it is because it was constructed to capture the way humans create their ideals: between wish and expectation, fictive dreams and rooted reality, the possibility of another world in this one. Ethnography provided an archive of practices and behaviors that was incredibly flexible in its possible relationships to the self—a self situated in a particular society in history, one society among almost infinite possibilities. What is more, ethnography provided the rhetorical means to jolt one from one’s well-worn grooves. The ideal comes from the prospect of this infinity, the imagination of protean flexibility, not the exact configuration. To set out, unambiguously, the details of the perfect state would be to close off the possibilities that *Utopia* opens up, to disorder the play.

¹²⁹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. and ed. C. D. C. Reeve, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 60.

The fiction that springs most forcefully from *Utopia* is not (or not only) the rhetorical play of irresolvable, constructed perspectives, but the fiction of the New World: a kind of existence and a kind of fantasy; a real world that was beyond imagination not so long ago and a mode of encountering it that is inevitably shot through with imagination. Like Utopia, the New World itself has the quality of nonexistence built in: it is so called because “because none of these countries were known to our ancestors, and to all who hear about them they will be entirely new.”¹³⁰ As More is writing it remains unknown to nearly everyone in Europe except for a few scanty accounts, and yet it *is* there. Nicholas Harpsfield, writing in 1557, grasped the point: “And surely this said jolly invention of Sir Thomas More seemed to bear a good countenance of truth, not only for the credit Master More was in the world, but even for that about that time many strange and unknown nations and many conclusions were discovered, such as our forefathers did neither know nor believe.”¹³¹ The particular fiction would not be possible through armchair ethnography or pure myth, however; the eye-witness account of Columbus and Vespucci is crucial to More’s creation. “You should have been with me in Utopia and seen with your own eyes their manners and customs as I did.” The idea that the character More could respond adequately to this kind of testimony, as if it were just one turn in a philosophical discussion, is slightly ridiculous. And yet, as the writings of Columbus and Vespucci evince, ethnography is as much a way for people to construct their reality as it is a description of what is out there.

¹³⁰ *Utopia*, 42.

¹³¹ Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sr Thomas Moore, knight, sometymes Lord high Chancellor of England*, ed. E. V. Hitchcock, Early English Texts Society 186, (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 102.

Dependent as it is on solid reality, a true report cannot help but be shaped by the limits and by the flexibility of one's imagination.¹³²

Utopia puts Hythloday's ethnographic report up against the rhetorical games played out in the garden, the ones apparently rooted in the real world, the best possible version of a humanist dialogue that more often takes the narrow, pedantic form of Hythloday's council meetings, or the ignorant lawyer's attempt to "demolish" his critique of English society, mercifully cut off. We should remember how difficult it would have looked for More, in the squabbling of the law courts and in the Church, in the jockeying among learned power players at Cardinal Morton's house and at the court of Henry VIII, to separate the pure, ideal form of the humanist tradition from its contaminants. The freedom of movement allowed by the imagination, More knew, is bound up with its often severe limitations.

To illustrate, in a minor way: the scholar Battista Guarino (son of the great humanist teacher Guarino Guarini), writing an educational treatise based on a humanist program of learning, suggests that geography will be important for any student to know. It will therefore "be extremely useful to familiarize students with Ptolemy's world-map, so that in describing various locations they may place that image before their mind's eyes and seem to be gazing on the real thing, as though they were actually present. Describing the world in any other way is usually a source of confusion."¹³³ For all its virtues, Renaissance humanism was not always well-positioned to see the slight absurdity in the claim that pointing at a map of the world is the same

¹³² Chloë Houston writes "Utopias, like travel narratives, can seem at once authentic and unreal, and, as travellers' tales, they have an unstable relationship with the truth." Houston, 8. See Houston, *The Renaissance Utopia* for a discussion of fact and fiction in the interplay between utopia, dialogue, and travel narrative.

¹³³ Battista Guarino, "A Program of Teaching and Learning" in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, trans. and ed. Craig W. Kallendorf, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 291.

as gazing on it as if one were actually present. More saw with exceptional clarity not only that gazing on the real object is absolutely necessary if one is to grasp the things of this world as they are (“Man in general” as the Utopians say, is inconceivable except as something to which one can point with one’s finger) but that even such direct experience is insufficient to supplant the mind’s eye in giving the world its shape.¹³⁴ More understands humans to be always caught up in webs of their own making, blind to the realities just beyond their view. And he understands, too, that all human capacity to experience and imagine manifests only more intricate yet equally fragile webs.

As Europeans continued to preoccupy themselves with their narrow vices, jockeying for position, even learnedly contesting fine points of philosophy and religion, the New World jumps out and snatches them unawares. The volcanic eruptions set off in the early modern Atlantic transformed the world, in reality and in imagination, even while most in Europe were paying more attention to other things.¹³⁵ (A few of them portrayed it this way, but it was also true.) Backwater Spain, and then backwater Europe, became unprecedented global powers because of the vast infusions of wealth. The encounter kindled the sweeping fires of globalization and capitalism. It resulted in tragedies of unimaginable scale, already underway by More’s time: the destruction of Indigenous populations by genocide and disease, the mass enslavement of Africans to labor in the New World. And it forced cultural encounters that would transform the way everyone involved would imagine their worlds. In the decades after a new continent first

¹³⁴ *Utopia*, 58. For a more complex reading of humanism, ethnography, and cartographic representation, see Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹³⁵ See J. H. Elliott’s “blunted impact” thesis, discussed above in the Introduction.

came into view, and while almost no one was writing anything interesting about it, More captures in *Utopia* the incredible power of the surprise.

Later in his life, having been caught up fully in a wider, far more violent social drama, a play of fixed and ferociously contested positions, More looks back briefly to the distant world in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. He asks, “who would not ween it impossible but if experience had proved it that the whole earth hangeth in the air, and men walk foot against foot, and ships sail bottom against bottom?” Though “right wise and well-learned” men had mocked the strange idea, it “is yet now founden true by experience of them that have in less than two years sailed the world round about.”¹³⁶ The point is not that More could really have believed the world to be flat before Magellan, or even that it was truly unimaginable before then. Men walking “foot against foot,” the idea of the Antipodes, of *Terra Incognita*, of geographical inversions and negations were all fantasies of long standing. But such ideas are unexpectedly distant from the belief forced upon Europeans by the New World, an extreme and total kind of imagination wrapped up in the experience of the real. “I would not have believed it myself if someone had just told me about it,” Hythloday says, “but I was there, and saw it with my own eyes.”¹³⁷ The experience of *Utopia* is the astonishing, earth-shaking feeling that the real and the imagined are suspended together as one, that the whole world hangeth in the air.

¹³⁶ *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, in *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Wegemer and Smith, 549. He continues, “many things shall seem to you such as all reason will resist, and nature will in no wise admit. And yet they shall be done well enough, and be in some other place in common use and custom,” *Dialogue*, 551. For More’s Geographical knowledge, see Lakowski, Romuald I. “Utopia and the ‘Pacific Rim’: The Cartographical Evidence.” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 5.2 (1999): 5.1–19. For an interesting discussion of the status of the flat earth idea, see James J. Allegro, “The Bottom of the Universe: Flat Earth Science in the Age of Encounter,” *History of Science* 55, no. 1 (2017): 61–85.

¹³⁷ *Utopia*, 54.

“A Guiana idol of Gold”: Raleigh in America

I.

Sir Walter Raleigh, having been imprisoned in the Tower of London for fifteen years, stole away in the dead of night. He had been tried on trumped-up charges of treason in 1603, and, with the failure of his second-chance trip to South America, knew that he faced imminent execution. The plan was to make it to France. He was instead apprehended on the Thames, carrying, “on [his] body,”

A Guiana idol of Gold
A Spleenstone (left with him for his own use).
One wedge of fine gold at 22 carats.
Another stob of coarser gold.
Item one plot of Guiana and Nova (R—) and another of the river of Orenoque.
The description of the river Orenoque.
A trial of Guianan ore with a description thereof.¹

These items all likely originate from his first voyage to Guiana, in present-day Venezuela, in 1595. They are mercenary, representing what he could offer to excite the imaginations of the powerful: riches in the form of New World gold, reach and power in the form of colonial possessions, his own experience and expert skill in the business of colonization. For he understood better than anyone in England the land and people of faraway Guiana, having gone there and conversed with them, and had overseen Elizabeth I’s first attempts to establish a colony in Virginia. Like More, he had finally fallen victim to the vicissitudes of the court that he had for a long time navigated so well. Like More he harbored a cynical repulsion from that world

¹ Qtd. in Whitehead, 116. From a letter from Thomas Naunton, Secretary of State, to Thomas Wilson.

mirrored by a fantasy of escape given form by the New World. Guiana was, for Raleigh, a world of “very rare colors and forms not elsewhere to be found, for as much as I have either seen or read.”² As he awaited execution for years in the Tower, writing the *History of the World* with the help of his substantial library and spending time with the native Guianan cacique called Harry, Thomas Harriot, and other friends (the status he had gained allowed him a comfortable imprisonment), he held close this dream of the New World: a complex and sustaining fantasy of the alien culture evoked by the idol, the land, and the material gold.

The items Raleigh carried were not only tools to leverage for practical advantage; they were the stuff from which an entire world could be built in the imagination, touchstones of an experience that Raleigh had created in his infamously poetic *Discovery of Guiana* (1596).³ As in *Utopia*, the imaginative quality of literature in conjunction with the real creates a powerful sense of culture—what is more, a startlingly relativist sense of culture—that is visible in the *Discovery* and seems to have impressed itself on Raleigh. More, Erasmus wrote, “takes a particular pleasure in contemplating the shapes, character, and behaviour of different living creatures. Thus there is hardly any kind of bird of which he does not keep one in his household, and the same with any animal that as a rule is rarely seen, such as monkey, fox, ferret, weasel, and the like. Besides

² Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of Guiana: With Related Documents*, ed. Benjamin Schmidt (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008). All quotes are from this modernized spelling edition.

³ The anthropologist James Clifford writes, “Some sort of ‘gathering’ around the self and the group—the assemblage of a material ‘world,’ the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not ‘other’—is probably universal. All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self. But the notion that this gathering involves the accumulation of possessions, the idea that identity is a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memories, experience), is surely not universal.” James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 218. For the culture of collecting, see Christian F. Feest, “The Collecting of American Indian Artifacts in Europe, 1493–1750,” in *America in European Consciousness*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 324–60.

these, if he sees anything outlandish or otherwise remarkable, he buys it greedily and has his house stocked with such things from all sources.”⁴ Raleigh’s collection suggests that he felt the same excited attraction to the new and strange. It is part of his larger sense that variety is the essence of life, that the culture suggested by the “idol” is a key to the meaning of everything else.

He writes, in *The History of the World*,

such is the multiplying and extensive virtue of dead earth, and of that breath-giving life which God hath cast upon time and dust, as that among those that were, of whom we read and hear; and among those that are, whom we see and converse with; everyone hath received a several picture of face, and everyone a diverse picture of mind; everyone a form apart, everyone a fancy and cogitation differing: there being nothing wherein Nature so much triumpheth as in dissimilitude.⁵

Raleigh’s *Discovery of Guiana* represents, at least in part, an exceptional openness to the cultures and peoples of the New World. Its reputation as a superficial and deluded piece of fantasy decorated with Amazons, monsters, and a mythical golden city is not exactly warranted. In cooperation with the work of Thomas Hariot and John White, it puts on display a profound and complex perception of culture made possible by ethnography.

It was also a scheme for Raleigh to get rich (and quick!). Those who bought in were promised that they, too, could share in the bounty. More’s utopian impulse was fed by the dream of rejecting property and wealth on the New World example, but not long after *Utopia* was published the dazzling scale of wealth to be gained by plundering New World gold began to be revealed. In 1519 the Spanish first encountered the incredible Aztec Empire of Mexico and soon began exporting the spoils of their conquest. In 1533 they sacked the Inca Empire of Peru, whose

⁴ Letter from Erasmus to Ulrich von Hutten, in Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. and trans. George M. Logan, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 148.

⁵ Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, ed. C. A. Patrides, (London: Macmillan, 1971), 47.

treasures entered global circulation thereafter. These were nothing, however, compared with the mining operation at Potosí, a veritable mountain of silver in the Andes, where Indians were coerced to work under brutal conditions within a system that combined de facto slavery with wage labor.⁶ The haul doubled the global amount of silver in global circulation by the end of the sixteenth century, and increased the amount in Europe nearly tenfold.⁷ In Spain, the boom period lasted throughout the sixteenth century. In England, the effects were felt later, beginning in about 1550. John Maynard Keynes writes, in his *Treatise on Money*, “Never in the annals of the modern world has there existed so prolonged and so rich an opportunity for the business man, the speculator and the profiteer. In these golden years modern capitalism was born.”⁸

Spain’s violent incursions into the New World had set off a bonanza. Raleigh felt himself to be, and was, in the midst of its throes. Spain had risen from provincial backwater of Europe,

⁶ See J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 93–99. African slavery was also instituted throughout New Spain, but the nature of the labor system differed based on local conditions. The high-altitude Potosí soon became one of the largest cities in the western world with a population of 100,000 in 1600. Indians there were forced into a system of low-wage labor designed to skirt the Crown’s prohibition on Indigenous slavery, but the labor force was also supplemented by voluntary Indigenous workers drawn in by the promise of wages.

⁷ Nuno Palma, “American Precious Metals and Their Consequences for Early Modern Europe,” in *Handbook of the History of Money and Currency*, ed. Stefano Battilossi, Youssef Cassis, and Kazuhiko Yago, (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 363–82. Spain, the first-order receiver, eventually faced severe negative effects from the financial tumult. Second order receivers, including England most of all, generally saw long-term benefits.

⁸ John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), 159. He is referring to a period of profit inflation in England from 1550 to 1650, and then wage increases from 1680 to 1700, as a direct result of the influx of New World gold and silver. In Spain he marks the period from 1519, with the first influx of gold from the Aztec Empire, to about 1596. He places the effect of the new supplies on England’s economic system at its maximum between 1585 to 1630. Keynes, 161. For a recent account of these economic developments in the North Atlantic, see Jonathan Scott, *How the Old World Ended: The Anglo-Dutch-American Revolution, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). For the cultural and intellectual impacts of the economic developments in Spain, see Elvira Vilches, *New World Gold: Cultural Anxiety and Monetary Disorder in Early Modern Spain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For the Atlantic sources of the bustling London markets at the end of this period, see Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy, 1660–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

itself a provincial backwater on the world scene, to one of the major global powers. England—and Raleigh—had only narrowly escaped its Armada in 1588. Even a parasitic relationship to this extraction paid off: the bulk of English maritime activity during these “golden years” was in piracy, plundering Spanish ships and coastal towns. But the total effect of the new bullion in circulation was enough to make the London markets, even those unrelated to global trade, immensely lucrative. The city population doubled between 1550 and 1600, and grew fivefold by 1700, which growth in turn fueled ever more market activity.⁹ Taking the longer view, Keynes sees this piracy as the origin of the British empire:

Indeed, the booty brought back by Drake in the *Golden Hind* may fairly be considered the fountain and origin of British Foreign Investment. Elizabeth paid off out of the proceeds the whole of her foreign debt and invested a part of the balance (about £42,000) in the Levant Company; largely out of the profits of the Levant Company there was formed the East India Company, the profits of which during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the main foundation of England’s foreign connections; and so on.¹⁰

In his optimistic prognostication “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” this story is the pivot between “the economic problem” that constitutes most of human history from its primitive beginnings, the struggle for basic necessities, and the modern age, in which the incredible power of compound interest on accumulated capital will gain humanity its freedom. The “modern age” began, he claimed, in the sixteenth century with the rise of prices and profits from Spain’s New World gold and silver. What was set in motion will lead (soon enough) to the possibility of outstripping the basic economic problem once and for all. Thereafter, “for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from

⁹ See Palma, “American Precious Metals.” For London’s population, “London,” *Britannica Academic*. See also Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Keynes, *Treatise*, 156–7.

pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.”¹¹

Keynes’s story is clarifying precisely because he is writing *against* the avarice and other evils that he knows attend capitalist modernity. The long view and humanistic focus on the good life savors of a utopian yearning: to escape the various corruptions bred by the modern condition, to create and be satisfied with enough, to achieve the total transformation of life possible if human action were not governed by scarcity.

But beware! The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to every one that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.¹²

His is a view of modernity that is not unfamiliar, to Raleigh or to us.

II.

Are the seemingly insatiable appetites unleashed in the early modern Atlantic World truly insatiable? Will they finally devour everything, or might they be marshaled toward a more prosperous, and more humane, equilibrium? This chapter will situate Raleigh at this pivotal moment, and find him puzzling over such questions that aim at human nature and cultures in flux. Critics have long read Raleigh’s *Discovery* as if it were pure discourse, unattached to the things of the world. To many it is a self-justifying but empty piece of literature, a romance to be

¹¹ John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 358–73.

¹² Keynes, “Economic Possibilities,” 372.

read as one of the elaborate dramas that constituted life in Elizabeth's court, an abstract and unrealized theory of empire, an ultimately self-referential text that tells us only about the ways Europeans constructed in their minds a false image of the Other. This chapter aims instead to emphasize Raleigh's traffic with the real: the world around him, including the natives of Guiana as people rather than figments, and the historical situation as it was shaped by the great economic upheavals of the early modern Atlantic. That is not to say those who attend to Raleigh's discursive language are wrong to do so, nor that I will not. What is wrong, at least in this case and likely in general, is to conceive of discourse as a limited sphere of mere phantasm—something ornamental to the hard external reality of, say, economics, empire, or human nature. Those spheres, material as they can be, are constituted by the meaning created by humans. They are not grounds of reality separate from culture; they are reality as it is constituted in culture. Raleigh's perspective is limited, of course, but that is the nature of all perspective. His allows us to see how the all-important developments of the sixteenth-century Atlantic World were made meaningful, not just in an individual mind but as they became incorporated into a wider culture.

The intersection of ethnography—the representation of culture, specifically the cultures of Indigenous New World peoples—with a new colonial capitalism in the early modern Atlantic gave shape to the modern world as it was understood and as it turned out. The following sections will lay out the points of friction in Raleigh's *Discovery* between his ethnography and his participation in the economic developments of colonialism; examine Raleigh's ethnographic representation of Indigenous cultures; situate the narrative within the longer view of colonial capitalism stemming from the Atlantic world; and conclude with Raleigh's attempt to grapple with these conflicting influences through primitivist myth. The view of culture glimpsed by More in the beginnings of New World writing is paid off in Raleigh's true ethnography. So too is

the sense that Raleigh inhabited a new and modern age, the legacy of the humanists. Both are wrapped up in the economic reality set off by the plunder of New World gold and the creation of a global, capitalist market economy—a reality in which Raleigh took a leading role and which he perceived with exceptional sensitivity, and a reality that went hand in hand with unfathomable human destruction.

Raleigh's *Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana* captures this cultural moment in which the astonishing highs and lows of the modern world begin to be disclosed. The work has a reputation for empty fantasy, not least of all because the large, rich, and beautiful empire of which he writes did not exist. The myth of *El Dorado*, the golden city known to Raleigh as Manoa, joins his stories of Amazons and monstrous Acephali as an apparent poetic compensation for his failure to return with the promised treasure. His inclusion of these myths has seemed to mark the work as a relic of an older age, even if in other respects his way of writing the travel narrative has seemed groundbreaking. And his descriptions of the golden city with its legendary emperor confirm that he was as much taken in by the story as he hoped his powerful readers would be.

All the vessels of his [the emperor's] house, table, and kitchen were of gold and silver, and the meanest of silver and copper for strength and hardness of metal. He had in his wardrobe hollow statues of gold which seemed giants, and the figures in proportion and bigness of all the beasts, birds, trees, and herbs that the earth bringeth forth; and of all the fishes that the sea or waters of his kingdom breadth. He had also ropes, budgets, chests, and troughs of gold and silver, heaps of billets of gold, that seemed wood, marked out to burn. Finally, there was nothing in his country whereof he had not the counterfeit in gold.¹³

The enticement figured in this tableau of wrought gold is at once the promise of fabulous wealth and the vision of abundant variety inspired by the cultures he encountered.

¹³ Raleigh, 53.

But the sense of “myth” that has long been attached to *El Dorado* and other elements of Raleigh’s writing—i.e. something that is not true—restricts our understanding of what is happening in this and other attempts to grasp the significance of the New World. More useful is “myth” in the anthropological sense: (broadly) an expression of the symbolic system of a culture, a narrative means of ordering and giving meaning to experience of the world.¹⁴ If myth is, as Claude Lévi-Strauss and others in his wake understand it, a way of dealing with disharmonic or opposed structural impulses in a society, the centrality of this description of *El Dorado* to Raleigh’s work suggests the nature of the competition within his own culture. The empire has created an entire mirror world out of gold, a one-to-one correspondence between art and nature, map and territory. Raleigh’s focus here is suggestive in itself: the art, and not simply the gold, is the point of interest; the doubling reflects his own culture’s understanding of the New World as another world, a opposed reflection of their own. Most importantly, the city is pristine, untouched even by the Spanish. This world of correspondence is, then, a fantasy of uncorrupted wholeness, offered precisely to whet corrupt European appetites.

It is important, however, that Raleigh’s encounters with the natives of Guiana are all friendly, that he finds their cultures universally admirable, that his vision of conquest is in fact one of diplomatic alliance with the powerful Empire of Guiana and the people he has met along the way. As much as he spoke to an unexceptional zeal for gold, he represents an exceptional and unexpected openness to the cultures and peoples of the New World.¹⁵ Though Raleigh is

¹⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428–44. Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought*, vol. 2 of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) argues that humans are symbol-wielding animals, and myth is a “form of thought.”

¹⁵ Allan Galloway’s recent biography *Sir Walter Raleigh: Architect of Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2019) argues that Raleigh conceived of a new form of “benevolent empire” out of Hermeticist ideas of universal empire, involving cooperation with the natives. While Raleigh’s intentions are not the be-all and

sometimes associated with Jan Van der Straet's famous image of an armored Vespucci confronting a female embodiment of America, it is not quite right to conflate the two.



Theodoor Galle, after Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus. *Allegory of America*, from *New Inventions of Modern Times (Nova Reperta)*, c. 1600, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

end-all of our assessment, he is fairly explicit about them, and we cannot grasp his relationship to early modern colonialism without understanding them.



Theodore de Bry, *Grands et Petits Voyages*, 1617.¹⁶

Michel De Certeau writes of Van der Straet's engraving as "an inaugural scene" having an "almost mythic value": "a colonization of the body by the discourse of power. This is *writing that conquers*. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, 'savage' page on which Western desire will be written."¹⁷ Louis Montrose, in a trenchant and influential reading of Raleigh, takes this statement as a starting point.¹⁸ Between the almost nude, female personification of America

¹⁶ See also Michael Alexander, *Discovering the New World Based on the Works of Theodore de Bry* (New York: Harper Row, 1976), 177.

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xxv.

¹⁸ Louis Montrose, "The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery," in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 177–217.

in the foreground and the depiction of cannibalism in the background, the image represents a familiar myth of the New World as Europeans imagined it.

The images Raleigh creates are encounters between people, too, but they are nearly all about communication and exchange with recognizably different cultures. *El Dorado* is not, in Raleigh's account, a city. It is a person, the emperor of Guiana whose designation (the golden one) comes from a ritual: those who pledge the emperor are anointed with balsam before "servants of the emperor, having prepared gold made into fine powder, blow it through hollow canes upon their naked bodies, until they be all shining from the foot to the head."¹⁹ If the ritual here is meant to stoke European desire for gold—and it is—it also registers an awareness that native cultures are meaningful in themselves, that it is their own discourse written on their bodies, governing their actions. Likewise, in one of the widely-disseminated images from Theodore de Bry's edition of Raleigh's work, he and his men look on curiously as native Guianans disinter skeletons of their ancestral dead for decoration and display. "When their commanders die," Raleigh writes in the corresponding description, "they use great lamentation, and when they think the flesh of their bodies is putrified, and fallen from the bones, then they take up the carcass again, and hang it in the *Casiquies* house that died, then deck his skull with feathers of all colors, and hang all his gold plates about the bones of his arms, thighs, and legs." This description of funerary ritual, like his other descriptions of Indigenous practices, bears little trace of the set structures of European fantasy.

¹⁹ Raleigh, 56. Mary Baine Campbell makes the same observation: "This passage inserts another new element into the old images of desire through which the early writers understood the new lands: the central figure is human, the destination then imaginable as an encounter; the climax will be social." Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 248.

This is not a first encounter. In one of the first accounts of the New World, Diego Chanca reports finding “an infinite number of men’s bones and skulls hung up about the houses” which leads them to conclude that “the islands were those of Caribe, which are inhabited by people who eat human flesh.”²⁰ To the authors of several Spanish accounts of Guiana and elsewhere, the practice of exhumation and secondary burial was evidence of cannibalism and thus of the Indians’ inhumanity. To Raleigh, the encounter with other forms of funerary ritual is a moment of insight into an alien culture, a confrontation with the variety of humanity that runs counter to the many ways in which European colonization flattens its others.²¹ Raleigh writes of cannibalism twice: once as meaningful ritual, with no hint of disgust—a ceremony in which the Arwacas drink the powdered bones of their “lords”—once as a native expectation that the *English* are cannibals.²² His sophisticated sense of culture and of the ways in which it is constructed by human art complicates what looks like a close reflection between the two above images. This sense of culture is mixed uneasily in the frenzy for gold and power in which Raleigh was swept up.

²⁰ Chanca, “The Report of Diego Chanca on Columbus's Second Voyage to America (1494),” in *Of Cannibals and Kings: Primal Anthropology in the Americas*, ed. Neil L. Whitehead, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 72–81.

²¹ Luciana Villas Bôas has argued for a shift in the representation of cannibalism during the mid-sixteenth century, from a designation of exotic alterity to a ritual, symbolic practice to be compared to European rituals. The focal points of this shift are, according to Bôas, Jean de Léry’s *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil* (1578), André Thevet’s *Singularités de la France Antarctique* (1557), and Hans Staden’s *Warhaftig Historia* (1557). Bôas, “The Anatomy of Cannibalism: Religious Vocabulary and Ethnographic Writing in the Sixteenth Century,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 12, no. 1 (2008): 7–27. Neil Whitehead points out that “the custom of secondary burial and the display of ancestral bones were often taken by the Spanish as evidence of ‘cannibal’ feasting.” Raleigh is informed of these practices both by other written reports, including a description of secondary burial among the Algonquians in Harriot’s *Brief and True Report*, and by his Indigenous pilot. Both customs have subsequently and repeatedly been observed, according to Whitehead, note 160.

²² Raleigh, 75.

It was an unstable compound, and Raleigh consumed it, like one of his tinctures, throughout his life. Given the opportunity to conquer and colonize Guiana, he writes, “I shall willingly spend my life therein.” Twenty-one years later, on the fateful second voyage, he writes to his wife Elizabeth from Guiana, “To tell you that I might be here king of the Indians now were a vanity, but my name hath still lived among them. Here they feed me with fresh meat and all that the country yields, and all offer to obey me.”²³ These are dreams of escape and absorption—of “going native”—as much as power fantasies. He adopted their tobacco use himself in the Elizabethan court because he held the monopoly on its trade, but also because he saw that “in the excessive taking whereof, they [the Ciawani] exceed all nations, and notwithstanding the moistness of the air in which they live, the hardness of their diet, and the great labors they suffer to hunt, fish, and fowl for their living, in all my life either in the Indies or in Europe did I never behold a more goodly or better favored people, or a more manly.” Their way of life is admirable, even exemplary. Having become stuck in a branch of the Orinoco near the Ciawani people just described, Raleigh thinks momentarily of staying with “60 of our men to have inhabited like rooks upon trees with those nations.”

This attraction derived in part from a repulsion from modern civilization; it took the form of a colonial project that inevitably replicated the corruptions it sought to escape. Raleigh’s voyage to Guiana was taken under a condition of quasi-banishment from Elizabeth’s court, a

²³ Raleigh, *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*. ed. Agnes Latham and Joyce Youings, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999) 345–6. Neil Whitehead cites reports that “Waterali” and “Gualtero” remain honorific titles in local Amazonian dialects well into the eighteenth century. Line Cottegnies follows this mutual linguistic exchange in creating a “kind of mutual ‘colonial mimicry,’ whereby the colonial discourse accommodates (and is accommodated by) Indigenous languages and practices,” emphasizing Raleigh’s curiosity and impulse to “go native.”Cottegnies, “‘Waterali’ Goes Native: Describing First Encounters in Sir Walter Raleigh’s *The Discovery of Guiana* (1596)” in *British Narratives of Exploration: Case Studies on the Self and Other*, ed. Frédéric Regard, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 52.

rejection that brought about (if he is indeed the author) the acerbic, total cynicism of “The Lie” (1592). The poem razes, in turn, the pretensions of court, church, potentate, wealth, honor, beauty, favor, and the rest of the world of pretended civility.

Tell men of high condition,
That manage the estate,
Their purpose is ambition,
Their practice only hate.
And if they once reply,
Then give them all the lie.²⁴

The world he inhabits is corrupt in every part. Moreover, the primitivist attraction to the remote, simpler life of the other is always attached to this understanding of the world as endlessly debased. *The Discovery* represents a collision of the two worlds, as well as Raleigh’s attempt to manage the collision. It is explicable from the local circumstances of his own life, the life in Elizabeth’s orbit as well as his experiences as a colonist in Virginia and Ireland, but he also perceived it within the wider frame that is the history of the world.

And so Raleigh’s account attempts to represent the world historical significance that he perceived in the encounter despite its slight effect on the real world. In what has become the most famous passage of the narrative, Raleigh begins his final overture to rally the queen to his cause with another powerful image that links the human body, its culture, and the desired possessions, again evoking the exhumation of the native dead. Now, however, it is the English who are to open Indian graves.

To conclude, Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought; the face of the earth hath not been torn, nor the virtue and salt of the soil spent by manurance. The graves have not been opened for gold, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their images pulled down out of their temples. It hath never been entered by any army of strength, and never conquered or

²⁴ “The Lie,” 19–24, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century, The Early Seventeenth Century*, 10th edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, George M. Logan, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 528–9.

possessed by any Christian prince.²⁵

This is a prospect in which the potential material plunder is suffused with cultural meaning—for both Indians and Europeans—far beyond even the outsized allure of New World gold.²⁶

Anchored by the startling use of “maidenhead,” the land is embodied as female, the chiefly economic gain to be had expressed as male sexual desire. (As with “Virginia,” the impression is complicated by its dual referent to the untouched land and the potent, imperial virginity of Raleigh’s queen, her image transposed here and elsewhere onto the “Empire” of Guiana.) This embodiment of the land as human is only one in a series of quickly flashing metaphors, continuous with and overlaying one another. “Never sacked, turned, nor wrought.” “Sacked”: the image of the unspoiled land embodied anatomically by one person becomes an (almost) impenetrable city. “Turned”: with agricultural resonance, as well as crafted—made—or turned out—unmade. And “wrought”: worked, but also fashioned like art, a sense that evokes Raleigh’s paradoxical description of the wild natural landscape seeming “as if [it] had been by all the art and labour in the world so made of purpose.” A glimpse of the embodied woman returns in “the face of the earth [that] hath not been torn” with the same multiple exposure with which the agricultural turning of the land becomes the unearthing of native bodies, which in turn becomes

²⁵ Raleigh, 109.

²⁶ The large body of commentary on the passage attests to its powerful resonance. For Montrose, it is the perfect encapsulation of a colonial discourse that represents European mastery over American land and Indigenous peoples as male mastery over women. Montrose characterizes the passage, “by means of negatives conveys a proleptically elegiac sympathy for this unspoiled world at the same time that it arouses excitement at the prospect of despoiling it.” Montrose, 188. Helen Burgess follows this line, showing how “Raleigh’s document presents us with a prime example of the way in which (female) bodies are coded as landscapes for exploration and exploitation, while at the same time romanticised as being in some way ultimately inaccessible – a virgin space, inviolate.” Burgess, “Nature without Labor,” in *Goddesses and Queens* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 102. Both she and Nathan J. Probasco tie this gendered metaphor to the natural resources promised by the New World. Probasco, “American Bodies and Landscapes in Early English Colonisation,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 22, no. 1 (2018): 16–38.

the literal practice of mining in the earth as well as mining the cultural centers of native temples, where religious images of silver and gold may be melted down to a raw, refashionable material, or return intact as “A Guiana idol of Gold.”

If there is no better articulation of European colonial desire from the Renaissance, there is also none quite so complex. At every turn promised gain is shadowed by loss. The metaphors are metaphorical, but they are also the things themselves: human bodies, cities, land. The materiality of the venture’s economic prospects becomes the materiality of the human body, feeling (tearing at the face) or unfeeling yet still a profound violation (forcibly opening graves). And the stable materiality of gold, body, and land then erodes away to reveal the nebulous stuff of culture, the meaning-making and identity-forming nexus of values, beliefs, and worldviews that allows one to comprehend the violation being proposed because it is a part of oneself and because one perceives an alien version in another. One does not need to accept the structuralist organization of culture into binaries to see the antithetical habit of thought embedded in Raleigh. It had been conditioned into Renaissance culture by humanist rhetoric, *in utramque partem*. It is also a way of thinking developed when one’s imagination is structured by the awareness of other cultures that are almost always rhetorically positioned as “another world,” in this case a world of gold. The images in the above passage evoke in equal parts innocence and corruption, peace and violence, nature and artifice, temptation and repulsion, gain and loss, and the transactions being made are never as clearly apportioned as we might expect.

For example: the despoiler of the unspoiled gains something, but not the essential quality of the unspoiled. And because it is the unspoiled nature of the land, people, etc. that the former so vehemently desires, an idea valued beyond price, its spoiling registers as irredeemable loss. The loss is really felt by those on the other end, of course. But the construction of Guiana as

unspoiled in the “maidenhead” passage does not have to exist in these encounters. Julius Caesar does not imagine the Britons he conquers as innocents. Neither does Hakluyt imagine the project this way, writing in a dedication to Raleigh, “To posterity no greater glory can be handed down to than to conquer the barbarian, to recall the savage and the pagan to civility, to draw the ignorant within the orbit of reason.”²⁷ Desire and possession are not impulses at odds with each other; desire for uncorrupted wholeness *is*, however, at odds with possession understood as inherently corrupting. He tries strenuously to have it both ways—he constructs the narrative around a solution in which possession is not the corrupting one he sees all around him, and does so in a far more coherent way than many readers have perceived—but the irresolution remains. It is this unnecessary construction, repeated and elaborated throughout the collective ethnography of the New World, that motivates both the amplified desire and the amplified sense of loss captured in Raleigh’s narrative. He imagined his own age to be one in which the new heights of human civilization are mirrored by new depths of depravity. The power to achieve one’s fantasies, to shape the world in previously unthinkable ways, is also a vast destructive power.

The modernity formed by so many developments in the early modern Atlantic was a Faustian bargain whose consequences constitute our world of unfathomable wealth and technological power coextensive with a legacy of immeasurable human and ecological destruction. Those present at the outset were often conscious of the bargain being made, even while making it themselves. The Renaissance frequently understood itself as gaining the world at great cost, the enchantments of unimagined knowledge, riches, power—all just then coming

²⁷ Hakluyt’s ideas about the New World were more complex than this quote lets on, however, and generally were in accord with Raleigh. See David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. “Protestantism and Empire: Hakluyt, Purchas and Property,” 61–99.

within reach—irresistible in the face of old bulwarks against the pursuit of earthly things. Our world has its roots in the way this New World prospect was perceived and thought about, and few grasped it as perceptively as Raleigh.

III.

There has always been something paradoxical about Raleigh's position in the grand historical accounts of the modern world. His New World ventures were all failures, amounting to faint blips on the historical radar. The *Discovery* is often put alongside *Utopia* because, although Raleigh really did go to South America, in terms of its real consequences it might as well be as fictional. On the other hand he really does seem prescient about the role of the New World in the course of history. The body of representations he and his associates produced—including, under Raleigh's direction, Harriot's *Brief and True Report*, John White's illustrations of Algonquians, De Bry's hugely popular editions of these, and Hakluyt's promotional writings—offer some of the most groundbreaking European views of the New World and, most significantly, its Indigenous cultures.

The ethnographic developments of the Raleigh circle were deliberate, and have become much easier to appreciate following the anthropologist Neil Whitehead's 1997 edition of the *Discovery*, among other scholarship. We cannot understand Raleigh's place in the narrative of the Atlantic world without recognizing that he spent over half of his life—thirty-four years, from 1584 until his death in 1618, though probably not continuously—in intimate conversation with native inhabitants of North and South America. Around twenty Indigenous Algonquians, Guianans, and Trinidadians lived with Raleigh and Harriot for extended periods in Durham

House and then the Tower.²⁸ They played vital roles in all of Raleigh's New World ventures, and must be understood to be co-authors of the ethnography as well as major influences on Raleigh's own understanding. Neither can we understand the larger, pivotal moment in the early modern Atlantic without seeing Raleigh as diving into and being carried along by currents that he could only partly recognize: the economic transformations spurred by the plunder of New World gold and silver; the development of merchant capitalism within a complex web of state and private colonial ventures; the ravages of demographic collapse on the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas through war, slavery, and disease. These upheavals across the entire Atlantic created a new world for all involved.

When Raleigh made his "discovery," the Spanish had been continuously active in the New World for a century. Guiana itself had been well-trod by previous Spanish expeditions (which Raleigh acknowledges but also occludes). By 1580 their colonial enterprise included 225 cities and towns throughout the Caribbean and the continental Americas south of California and Florida, and 331 by 1630.²⁹ They had large agricultural and mining operations built on a foundation of enslaved Indians and Africans, which supported the colonies and produced enough wealth to make Spain a major global power. The Portuguese too had built a large sugar plantation system in Brazil fed by their extensive African slave trading network. England

²⁸ Harriot, who learned their languages, probably taught them English in Durham House until 1603, then after 1607 in the Earl of Northumberland's Syon House in London. Raleigh identifies a cacique he called Harry as his "servant" in the Tower, though the nature of the relationship is uncertain. Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. ch. 2 "Raleigh's American Interpreters," 21–41. For the impact on English ethnography during this period, see Alden T. Vaughan, "Raleigh, Harriot, and Anglo-American Ethnography," *Literary and Visual Raleigh*, ed. Christopher M. Armitage, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 242–56.

²⁹ Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 41.

sponsored a few tentative expeditions early on with John and Sebastian Cabot in 1497 and 1508–9, and some ventured to the cod fisheries of the North Atlantic or attempted to find other routes to Asia. But while Spain experienced an explosion of wealth and power following the invasions of Mexico and Peru in the 1520s and 30s, England was (like More after *Utopia*) consumed by the domestic and foreign upheavals of the Reformation, which pitted them against a newly-enriched Spain and Rome.³⁰

None of the Tudor monarchs showed any real interest in exploration or colonization, and any plans cooked up by less powerful figures were posed in reaction to Spain. Thus the first significant book of New World travel writing came in 1555 with the return to Catholicism under Mary I. Richard Eden's translation of Peter Martyr's *Decades of the New World* is dedicated to Mary on the occasion of her marriage to Philip II of Spain. This publication represents a strain of writing about the New World that holds up the Spanish Empire as exemplary, having "shewed a good example to all Christian nations to follow," and chastises England for its failure to do so. It includes, along with the mostly Spanish materials Martyr had collected, an account of the merchant John Lok's expedition to Africa in 1554, which marked the English entry into the Atlantic slave trade. John Hawkins would follow up this venture in the 1560s, making a significant fortune for himself and Elizabeth I by trading African slaves in the New World.

Eden's view of the Indians is, in this context, not pretty. They are a "devilish generation," "cruel Cannibals" whose "former liberty . . . [was] rather a horrible licentiousness than a liberty."³¹ Spain's "merciful wars against these naked people" have fallen out so that the

³⁰ For the comparative Spanish and British exploitation of resources and labor, see Elliott, 88–114. See also Trevor G. Burnard, *The Atlantic in World History, 1490–1830*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 59–76, which includes the Portuguese slave trade and plantation systems in Brazil.

³¹ Dennis Britton has identified in Raleigh's *Discovery* a symbolic attribution of cannibalistic tropes to the Spanish in order to emphasize their cultural alterity, while Indians are conversely likened to the English.

“benefits . . . enseeded to the vanquished [rather] than the victors.” He hopes to align England with Spain, arguing against an incipient anti-Spanish Black Legend that had apparently grown up during England’s Protestant years. Eden dismisses those in England who criticize the Spanish for their cruelty toward the Indians, “us[ing] them as bondmen and tributaries, where before they were free,” for failing to recognize the good the Spaniards do.³² Here we find another primitivist story by which Europeans conceived of their relationship to the New World. It will help put into relief the primitivist aspects of Raleigh’s account, expressed under changed geopolitical circumstances.

The appeal to universal history and the primitive origins of humanity everywhere suffuses Eden’s representation of New World empire. To those in England who warn against the avaricious appetites of empire, he takes an etiological perspective that imagines the early progression of human civilization.

Therefore whatsoever our chief intent be, either to obtain wordly fame or richness, (although the zeal to increase Christian religion ought chiefly to move us) I would to God we would first attempt the matter: And then I doubt not but that it would so come to pass with us as it did with them who of long time after the beginning of the world before men were accustomed to eat flesh, thought it first sufficient so to use themselves among beasts that they were not hurt of them: but shortly after, used them for their commodity: Then begun to wear their skins: And in time, fell to eating of their flesh, and to use certain parts of them for remedies against diseases. Even so may these barbarians by the only conversation with the Christians, (although they were enforced thereto) be brought to such familiarity with civility and virtue, that not only we may take great commodity

Such characterizations directly invert Eden’s treatment of the two groups in a way that shows the ease with which the axis of cultural difference could be shifted for rhetorical effect. Britton, “Allegory and Difference in Raleigh and De Bry: Reading and Seeing the *Discoverie*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 41, no. 1 (2011): 117–36.

³² For a reading of Eden as more ambivalent about his position mediating New World, see Edmund Valentine Campos, “West of Eden: American Gold, Spanish Greed, and the Discourses of English Imperialism,” in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, ed. Margaret Rich Greer, Walter Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

thereby, but they may also herewith imbibe true religion as a thing accidental although neither they nor we should seek the same.

The force of “commodity” drives civilization onward. Like Erasmus’s genealogy in the previous chapter, or primitivist histories following the Lucretian legacy, the necessity of protection from animals precipitates other features of social life. In this case, the story occupies the peculiar and illuminating position between “us” and the “barbarians.” If “we,” the English, were to “attempt the matter,” Eden predicts the pursuit of “commodity” in the New World would turn out like those primitive societies: in pursuit of safety and then commodity, they accidentally discover beneficial medicines. Those primitive societies, it is implied, became the civilized “we.” “Even so,” the second part of the analogy goes, the “barbarians” of the New World may rise to civility and receive the medicinal benefit of true religion as an accidental consequence of the English pursuit of commodity. That is, both the civilized Europeans and uncivilized Indians are wrapped up in the same ongoing primitivist story, each enacting the same universal process.

This strain of New World literature imagines colonization as a civilizing project, the Indians as a mass of savages living the basest of lives. At best, the natives, “living only after the law of nature, may well be likened to a smooth and bare table unpainted, or a white paper unwritten, upon the which you may at the first paint or write what you list.” Beneath the cruelty and greed of the colonial project, which Eden cannot deny, is an underlying optimism: that they are simply growing pains as the heathenish Indians are slowly absorbed into the universal body of Christendom, when *they* become like *us*. The recognition of common humanity here, the assumption of a universal natural state, does little for the Indians. Eden’s account takes cues from the Spanish sources that constituted most printed material available in England concerning the Americas throughout the sixteenth century, in particular the claim to be situated within

sacred universal history and justified by the mass salvation of souls.³³ The claims, Eden finds, are easily reconciled with natural desire for “wordly fame or richness.” The ultimate goal of the enterprise, conceived fundamentally in religious terms, is to restore the world to a pre-lapsarian state by “converting [the Indians] to a better mind, that the prophecy may herein be fulfilled that the wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” It is useful to hear the echo, faint as it is, in Keynes.

When Raleigh received his patent to colonize the New World from the Protestant Elizabeth I in 1584, things had changed. Spain had become a national enemy; Raleigh was one of several prominent men who engaged directly in the low- and occasionally high-level conflict throughout Elizabeth’s reign. The ethnographic project that Raleigh and Harriot undertook beginning in the 1580s was shaped by these circumstances. Bartolomé de las Casas’s *Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies* was translated into English in 1583 and became the touchstone for the Black Legend. Thereafter English historiography often emphasized the genocidal horrors of the Spanish Empire, blaming their mad appetite for Indian gold as well as their Catholicism.³⁴ To some in England this suggested a strategy of alliance with Indians against the Spanish; England would help throw off the oppressive yoke and gain a rival empire in return.

Raleigh understood that having friendly native liaisons was indispensable, especially after the experiences of his Roanoke colonies. The English had often been met with resistance by the Algonquians of Roanoke and generally handled it poorly, provoking and exacerbating tensions. Manteo, the Croatan *werowance* (petty chief) who had returned with a reconnaissance mission in 1584 and stayed with Raleigh and Harriot for eight months to learn each other’s languages and

³³ Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

³⁴ See Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan, eds., *Rereading the Black Legend*.

exchange information, saved the English colonists on many occasions from making things worse.³⁵ (Wanchese, the Roanoke who had also been brought to England with Manteo, seems to have returned to his people and actively resisted the English presence on his island.) After the first Roanoke colony, Manteo returned to England again in 1586 with another Algonquian, Towaye, helping Harriot reconstruct his *Brief and True Report* after his much larger body of ethnographic observations was thrown overboard during a storm. That is, what was successful in the general failure of Raleigh's Roanoke colonies came from close cooperation with the natives. According to Alden T. Vaughan, "A new chapter in England's treatment and perception of Americans began in 1584" with the arrival of Wanchese and Manteo in England, a form of Anglo-Indian relations spearheaded by and unique to Raleigh in these years. Raleigh would replicate these strategies of diplomacy and ethnography as he turned his attention to Guiana.³⁶

The celebrated ethnographic writing and illustrations by Harriot and White, then, are the product of unusually careful observation of and appreciation for the Indian culture they encountered. Raleigh's later account of Guiana has the same qualities, for this circle of talented scientists and intellectuals was organized around him.³⁷ These representations are also the product of a contingent geopolitical arrangement and a particular cultural moment, a triangulated reaction to Spanish preeminence, but these factors (in conjunction with uncommon personal

³⁵ Harriot learned at least some Algonquian and successfully instructed Wanchese and Manteo in English. The available evidence gives us no insight into Raleigh's involvement. Vaughan, *Indian Interpreters*. See also Michael Leroy Oberg, "Between 'Savage Man' and 'Most Faithful Englishman': Manteo and the Early Anglo-Indian Exchange, 1584–1590," *Itinerario* 24, no. 2 (2000): 44–22, and Oberg, *The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand: Roanoke's Forgotten Indians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

³⁶ Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters*, 19.

³⁷ Andrew Hadfield, "Thomas Harriot and John White: Ethnography and Ideology in the New World," in *The Arts of 17th-century Science: Representations of the Natural World in European and North American Culture* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), Vaughan, "Raleigh, Harriot, and Anglo-American Ethnography."

openness and talents) were the conditions that allowed for a sophisticated mode of thinking and writing about culture also visible in More. This time, though, the conception of culture is grounded in true experience; the ethnography seeks to represent real people. This was no easy task. As Anthony Pagden writes, “The European observer in America [...] was not equipped with an adequate descriptive vocabulary for his task and was beset by an uncertainty about how to use his conceptual tools in an unfamiliar terrain.”³⁸ Some have seen Raleigh and Harriot as key figures in the long-term development of ethnography. Mary Baine Campbell argues that Raleigh is instrumental in the shift away from earlier tendency to describe novelty in terms of the familiar, a text on the fulcrum between medieval marvels and modern cultural diversity: his narrative strategy of subjective experience “allows him to convey the feel of an alien land, the character of alien people, even the taste of alien liquors. Sailing down a river, feasting with the native inhabitants on shore: the close narration of such activities makes scenery and culture far more accessible than do the static *descriptio* of the cosmographer or the lyrical transformations of Columbus’s earlier accounts.”³⁹ Line Cottegnies argues that Raleigh’s ethnography represents “a type of experimental observation that Bacon would come to theorise only a few years later, in *The Advancement of Learning*.”⁴⁰ It was no doubt helpful that Raleigh and especially Harriot were accomplished scientists.

³⁸ Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 11.

³⁹ Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, 233.

⁴⁰ Line Cottegnies, “A ‘Science of Dreams’: The Fantastic Ethnography of Sir Walter Raleigh and Baconian Experimentalism,” in *A Knight's Legacy: Mandeville and Mandevillian Lore in Early Modern England*, ed. Niayesh, Ladan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 109. See also Cottegnies, “‘Waterali’ Goes Native.”

But this has not been the usual view. Raleigh's descriptions of fictional myths—the Mandevillean figures of Amazons and Acephali, as well as the *El Dorado* story—has allowed much of the ethnographic value of *The Discovery of Guiana* to be dismissed or misinterpreted as a relic of naïve Eurocentrism conforming, more or less, to an idea of the New World as a blank space ready to be populated by western fantasies. His use of myth—or lies, fiction, romance, imagination—in the writing of others has generally been seen as susceptibility rather than strategy, and Raleigh as overly enamored of his extensive reading at the expense of direct experience. It is the characteristic of Raleigh's text most readily referred to as representative.⁴¹ His skill in writing imaginative literature is generally seen as compensation for his failures—a diversionary tactic. The most ingenious of these readings is by Mary Fuller, who reads the tale as an empty signifier and extends the crisis of representation to Europeans' entire relation to the New World.⁴² Famously but less subtly, to David Hume the work is “full of the grossest and most palpable lies that were ever attempted to be imposed on the credulity of mankind.”⁴³

The anthropologist Neil Whitehead's edition of the *Discovery* reveals ethnography to be a core feature of the text, and a more sophisticated one than has usually been recognized. His reading of the narrative scrupulously places the evidence it provides in the context of other historical accounts and modern anthropological knowledge about Guiana. In two expansive

⁴¹ For instance, Francisco J. Borge, *A New World for a New Nation: The Promotion of America in Early Modern England* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 103: “In the *Discovery* Raleigh had a clear project in mind, a project that many of his predecessors and some of his successors shared, which was to divert his readers' attention from the sad reality of failure. Words would have to make up for that failure, and Raleigh employed these words for the imaginative recreation of an experience that did not take place.”

⁴² Mary Fuller, “Raleigh's Fugitive Gold: Reference and Deferral in *The Discoverie of Guiana*,” in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 218–40.

⁴³ David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, vol. 4, (Boston: Little, Brown, [1754], 1868), 123.

introductory essays he finds the work to be successful ethnography: it is a significant and useful source by which to understand the realities of sixteenth century Indigenous cultures of Guiana, including their networks of exchange as well as political and cultural developments arising from European presence. That is, he argues, “we must abandon the easy assumptions that the *Discoverie* is merely self-referential or largely invented, but in so doing it becomes possible to reclaim this text, and by implication a broad range of colonial documentation, for the insight it offers into native, not just colonial, practice.”⁴⁴

Alden T. Vaughan has traced what can be uncovered about the leading but usually overlooked role of Indians from Virginia, Guiana, and Trinidad who were brought to England in every aspect of the cultural entanglements, from the course of the encounters on the ground to the ethnographic representations that came out of them, including the composition of the *Discovery*.⁴⁵ Though Raleigh’s work is based on a few short weeks in Guiana, almost no one in sixteenth-century England had more sustained, intimate, and diverse interaction with inhabitants of the New World than Raleigh. His knowledge of the Ewaipanoma, who “are reported to have their eyes in their shoulders and their mouths in the middle of their breasts, and that a long train of hair growth backward between their shoulders,” is not the result of colorful fantasy stemming from his credulous reading of Mandeville (though he does note the connection), but the result of a conversation with “The son of *Topiawari*, which I brought with me into *England*” at some point after they had left Guiana for England.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Whitehead, 26.

⁴⁵ See Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters* and Vaughan, “Raleigh, Harriot, and Anglo-American Ethnography.”

⁴⁶ Whitehead, 92.

Moreover, this is good ethnography. What is important is what Raleigh was told, not what he believed was the truth. And, according to Whitehead, there is substantial evidence of Indigenous belief in monstrous races—an analogous cultural formation that is in fact useful to compare to the Mandevillean tradition if one is interested in the native perception of things.⁴⁷ Raleigh contrasts his method with the Spanish Antonio de Berrio, whom he captured in Trinidad and who had also been searching for *El Dorado*. He claims of Berrio, no doubt with exaggeration, that

he knew not the names of any of these [peoples], but *Caroli* only . . . for he had no means to discourse with the inhabitants at any time. Neither was he curious in these things, being utterly unlearned, and not knowing the east from the west. But of all these I got some knowledge, and of many more, partly by mine own travel, and the rest by conference; of someone I learned one, of others the rest, having with me an Indian that spake many languages, and that of *Guiana* naturally. I sought out all the aged men, and such as were greatest travelers.⁴⁸

There had already been a long tradition of Spanish quests for *El Dorado*. Raleigh needed a way to convince himself and his patrons that he could succeed where they had failed, and he found it in his uniquely close ties to the natives of Guiana.

Vaughan allows us a fuller glimpse of the nature of these connections. Raleigh's interpreter here was probably a native of Trinidad they called John Provost, who took several trips to England and back and became fluent in English, aiding not only Raleigh's voyage but also subsequent trips by Lawrence Keymis. But he is only one of the twelve or more men who had traveled abroad with Raleigh's several expeditions. Among these was Cayowaroco (nicknamed Gualterro after Raleigh), the son of the cacique Topiawari who may have performed

⁴⁷ Whitehead, 42–3, 91–4.

⁴⁸ Raleigh, 64.

briefly in a staged “devise” for the Queen.⁴⁹ Leonard Ragapo lived with Raleigh in England for three or four years and became a cacique upon his return to Guiana, saving the Harcourt expedition from starvation in 1609. Anthony Canabre was in England fourteen years, but we know nothing else about him or his experience. When Raleigh returned to Guiana in 1618, febrile from an illness that had swept through his crew, he and his men were saved by a “cacique [who] was also my servant and had lived with me in the Tower two years.”⁵⁰ The cacique, a Guianan called Harry, brought provisions to feed the company for seven or eight days while they recovered. Raleigh recalled, with gratitude, “being fed and assisted by the Indians of my old acquaintance, with a great deal of love and respect.”⁵¹

It should be no surprise, then, that the role of language in reciprocal cultural communication was one of the most important considerations in Raleigh’s overall project and is the source of the narrative’s most powerful effects. The “aged men” Raleigh sought out include his most important interlocutor: Topiawari, a “king” who is reported to be 110 years old, at whom Raleigh “marveled to find a man of that gravity and judgment and of so good discourse, that he had no help of learning nor breed.” He also speaks with representatives of Carapana, who is reported to be “a man very wise, subtle, and of great experience, being little less than one hundred years old.”⁵² In a moment Campbell notes as “quietly revolutionary,” Raleigh quotes

⁴⁹ Vaughan, 33, who cites Steven B. May, “The Poems of Oxford and Essex,” *Studies in Philology* 77 (1980): 88–90, in which the Earl of Essex stages a “devise” that includes an “Indian Prince.”

⁵⁰ Philip Edwards, *Last Voyages: Cavendish, Hudson, Raleigh: The Original Narratives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 211.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Vaughan, from “Raleigh to Ralph Winwood, 21 March 1618,” in *Sir Walter Raleigh: Selections from his ‘History of the World,’ his Letters, etc.*, ed. G. E. Hadow, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), 185. I have modernized the spelling.

⁵² Raleigh, 89.

Topiawari directly and in first person. The move imports at least some of the force of dialogic perspective that energized humanists and is found in More's *Utopia*, again linking aspects of the primitivist story to linguistic cultivation. The native leaders, despite having "no help of learning," nevertheless prove "wise," "subtle," full of "gravity" and "judgement." They are of "good discourse." Already having been mistreated by the Spanish and ransomed for gold and spleen-stones, Topiawari is particularly worried about the future of his people following his imminent death: "They have gotten a nephew of mine called Eparacano, whom they have christened Don Juan, and his son Don Pedro, whom they have also appareled and armed, by whom they seek to make a party against me in mine own country."⁵³ The truth of this plot is confirmed by other sources.⁵⁴ The effect of directly quoting a Guianan "king" lends Raleigh's writing of another culture a power that reverberates in other literary effects, from the proliferation of native words to the evocations of native myth to other subtle shifts in perspective.

At issue from the beginning was the role of fiction in Raleigh's account. Like the monstrous Ewaipanoma who "are reported to have their eyes in their shoulders and their mouths in the middle of their breasts," Raleigh's account of the Amazons has provoked jeers ever since the narrative was published. The mockery stung, and he came to his own defense in *The History of the World*: "I have produced these authorities in part to justify mine own relation of these Amazons, because that which was delivered me for truth by an ancient Cacique of Guiana, how upon the river of Papamena (since the Spanish discoveries called Amazons) that these women still live and govern, was held for a vain and unprobable report." It is likely that Raleigh's report

⁵³ Raleigh, 97.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, 49–50, 65–6.

captures something of native cultural responses to realities of female elite status in nearby cultures, or at least some of the same anxieties about social organization and gender that motivate Amazonian tropes in Europe. Cottegnies argues that “What *The Discovery of Guiana* reveals, ultimately, is the mutual entanglement of languages and practices in colonial milieu”; she describes this as “a mimetic, transitive exchange.”⁵⁵ Ironically, the reports for which Raleigh has been most criticized constitute some of his best ethnographic practice: the combination of his reading of more developed Spanish accounts combined with what native informants tell him about monstrous races, Amazons, and cannibals is evidence of the way myths arise and develop symbiotically in colonial situations, perhaps even registering complex native reactions to European myths as the Indians assimilated them into their own useful beliefs.⁵⁶

And Raleigh, again prompted by the Black Legend and his own designs, is intensely aware of the way native culture has responded to the recent history of Spanish presence in the region. Topiawari’s and Carapana’s incredible age is important because they were once witnesses to a world entirely ignorant of Europeans. Topiawari, aging witness of pre-contact America, gives voice to the turmoil caused by the blight of European empire: civil war, the overthrow of filial bonds, his descendants renamed, “appareled and armed” by the Spanish.⁵⁷

Raleigh’s penchant for the literary—his desire to be rhetorically forceful, surprising, evocative—creates a number of novel imaginative approaches to his encounter with native Guianans. The first mention of Elizabeth I in a work written for her eyes first, if not only, is as she was introduced to the inhabitants: with “her Majesty’s picture,” evoking an almost

⁵⁵ Cottegnies, “‘Waterali’ Goes Native,” 60.

⁵⁶ See Whitehead, 91–101.

⁵⁷ Raleigh, 97.

“idolatrous” reaction, and the first and only instance of her name in the text, “*EZRABETA CASSIPUNA AQUEREWANA*, which is as much as Elizabeth, the Great Princess, or Greatest Commander” (50). Raleigh here enacts a startling dislocation of perspective in which the readers are asked to view the queen as the natives might.

There is another startling displacement of perspective, perfectly suited to catch his readers’ notice and upset their expectations.

This *Arwacan* pilot, with the rest, feared that we would have eaten them, or otherwise have put them to some cruel death; for the Spaniards, to the end that none of the people in the passage towards *Guiana*, or in *Guiana* itself, might come to speech with us, persuaded all the nations that we were men-eaters and cannibals.⁵⁸

In this narrative it is solely the English who are imputed cannibals, and so the familiar designation is allowed to exist only in an imaginative space recognized as fabrication. Thus the idea that Raleigh’s ethnographic eye is often surprisingly clear-sighted and objective, while true, is incomplete. He is also sensitive to the fictionality of cultural representation, registering and playing with the complex ways cultural idioms circulate.

IV.

Raleigh should not be given too much credit, however. He knew the game he played. He knew, for instance, that when his Roanoke governor Richard Grenville discovered that the Algonquians had stolen a silver cup, he retaliated by burning a native village. Within a year the second governor, Ralph Lane, became paranoid of an Indian plot against the English and

⁵⁸ Raleigh, 80.

conducted a massacre.⁵⁹ The early history of Anglo-Indian settlement, Michael Leroy Oberg argues, is one of metropolitan inability to control frontier contact zones in which multiple cultural groups interact, “no single one of which can dictate unilaterally the nature of the ensuing relationships.”⁶⁰ From his letters it is clear that Raleigh believes his greatest accomplishment in Guiana to be his diplomatic work among the Indians, forging alliances with the cacique Topiawari and others. When he first mentions the voyage upon his return he is primarily concerned with preserving these relationships. The letter immediately following announces steps he has taken to safeguard the alliances, fearing that his fellow Englishmen will spoil his work by myopically misusing the Indians.

What becomes of Guiana I much desire to hear, whether it pass for a history or a fable. I hear Master Dudley and others are sending thither. If it be so, farewell all good from thence, for although myself like a cockscomb did rather prefer the future in respect of others, and rather sought to win the kings to Her Majesty’s service than to sack them, I know what others will do when those kings shall come simply [i.e. innocently] into their hands.

In the mean time I humbly beseech you to move Her Majesty that none be suffered to foil the enterprise and that those kings of the borders which are by my labor, peril and charge won to Her Majesty’s love and obedience be not by other pilferers lost again. . . . I am sending away a bark to the country to comfort and assure the people that they despair not nor yield to any composition with other nations.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Hariot writes “some of our companie towards the ende of the yeare, shewed themselues too fierce, in slaying some of the people, in some towns, upon causes that on our part, might easily enough haue been borne withall.” Hariot, Thomas. *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia (1588)*, ed. Paul Royster. Electronic Texts in American Studies: Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For a detailed account that focuses on the Algonquian perspective, see Michael Leroy Oberg, *The Head in Edward Nugent’s Hand: Roanoke’s Forgotten Indians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), esp. ch. 4 “A Killing and Its Consequences,” 81–100.

⁶⁰ Oberg, *Dominion and Civility: English Imperialism and Native America, 1585–1685* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 3.

⁶¹ Raleigh, *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes Latham and Joyce Youngs, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 125, 126–27.

Raleigh understands that the New World's attraction for many of his countrymen lies in taking advantage of what they imagine to be the simple natives and their easily-gotten treasures. If he sees his own role as ultimately taking the same sort of possession, he nevertheless hopes to preserve what he saw as an alternative means: "win[ning] the kings to Her Majesty's service." His relationship with these "kings" is a site at which his careful ethnography produces a destabilizing friction with the wider frames of Raleigh's *Discovery*: the complex world historical processes of capitalism and colonialism, the inexorable force of modernity.

The friction exists whenever gold appears in the narrative. And just because it could easily be relieved—if the English do not colonize, Raleigh argued, the far worse Spanish will—that does not mean it goes away. Returning again to the ritual function of gold and of burial in native culture, he describes how they "do cause much treasure to be buried with them . . . But if we should have grieved them in their religion at the first, before they had been taught better, and have digged up their graves, we had lost them all."⁶² These are the treasures he advertises in the "maidenhead" exhortation when he writes "the graves have not been opened for gold," the unmentioned implication of his description of exhumation and secondary burial in which they "hang all his [the cacique's] gold plates about the bones of his arms, thighs, and legs." To open graves for plunder would be a profound violation, and the way around it ("before they had been taught better," curiously the only mention of Christian conversion in the text) is particularly flimsy.

⁶² Raleigh, 107.

“There is a way found to answer every mans longing”: Raleigh’s astute observation of others is directed also at his countrymen, and what he finds are the human tendencies that have created the great upheavals of his age. He approaches the conclusion with the promise that

The common soldier shall here fight for gold, and pay himself in stead of pence, with plates of half a foot broad, whereas he breaketh his bones in other wars for provant and penury. Those commanders and chieftains that shoot at honor and abundance shall find there . . . rich and beautiful cities . . . temples adorned with golden images . . . sepulchres filled with treasure.⁶³

That is, he directs his *Discovery* to the pilferers, the ones who would sack the Indian cities and break open their graves rather than win over their kings. He offers himself as a leader in the endeavor because he recognizes the irresistible allure of easily gotten gains. Because, he remarks earlier, “the desire of gold will answer many objections.”⁶⁴

The claims are usually more complex than they first appear. The alliance with Topiwari includes a promise to help the Arromaia retaliate against the Epuremei, whom Raleigh understood to be the core subjects of the emperor of Guiana—thus the “commanders and chieftains” together.⁶⁵ Raleigh’s men would get the gold, which matters little to the Arromaia, while they would be content with the return of the women who were taken by the Epuremei. The Spanish presence really had caused significant migration in the area that Raleigh understands to be almost deserted, and so his idea of easily looting temples and graves does not inherently contradict the plan of non-violent tributary alliance, nor does it imply betrayal. The claim that the Epuremei and their borderers (such as Carapana’s people in Emeria) “would as good cheap have joined

⁶³ Raleigh, 107–8.

⁶⁴ Raleigh, 98.

⁶⁵ The plan also included, on Topiwari’s encouragement, alliances with borderers whom the Epuremei had conquered.

with the Spaniards at our return, as to have yielded unto us, when they had proved that we came both for one errant, and that both sought but to sack and spoil them” has been misread by many. Montrose, most influentially, sees it as “the most remarkable disruption of ideological consistency” in the text, a bald admission that “we came both for one errant.”⁶⁶ It is in fact Raleigh’s worry that the empire and the borderers will perceive them so, mistakenly, rather than understand that “we came as enemies of the Spaniards only” and come to a “composition,” i.e. an arrangement.

The arrangement: Raleigh and the Queen would get their tribute from the empire’s vast treasuries of gold and the means to contest Spain’s global power, Topiawari would receive the women who had been captured and the benefits of a powerful ally, the borderers would be freed from the yoke of the empire, the empire would receive protection from and even revenge against Spain (for Raleigh believed them to be a displaced scion of the Inca, and speculates that a joint force might retake Peru), the large contingent of English soldiers sent to defend Manoa for the emperor would be well-paid for easy work; all would inhabit a world of health and abundance and live wisely and agreeably and well. These are fantasies, to be sure—fantasies of being embraced as liberators, of quick and easy resolution, of a win-win-win arrangement in which each party gets what they most desire—and no doubt would have proved as short-lived as in Roanoke. But they are fantasies that belong to our own world as well.

⁶⁶ Montrose, 200. Along the same line, Gesa Mackenthun interprets this as an “ideological charade,” though it depends on several misreadings, including interpreting Raleigh’s explanation for *not* ransoming his allies—“if I had either laid hands on the borderers, or ransomed the lords, as Berreo did . . . I know all had been lost for hereafter”—as a straight proposal to ransom them. Mackenthun, *Metaphors of Dispossession: American Beginnings and the Translation of Empire, 1492–1637* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 181.

It is this awareness of the fantasies and forces that shape the wider world that allows Raleigh and the *Discovery* to reverberate beyond their immediate context. The wider frame, as Keynes could later identify, is that “in these golden years modern capitalism was born.” Raleigh stood at a fulcrum that was rapidly tipping over into a global capitalist market society, and the unease of such a position is part of the *Discovery*’s effect. The bell had already been rung, and there was no unringing it.

if we consider the many millions which are daily brought out of Peru into Spain . . . we find that by the abundant treasure of that country the Spanish king vexes all the princes of Europe, and is become, in a few years, from a poor king of Castile, the greatest monarch of this part of the world, and likely every day to increase if other princes forslow [neglect] the good occasions offered, and suffer him to add this empire to the rest, which by far exceedeth all the rest. If his gold now endanger us, he will then be irresistible.⁶⁷

He had faced the tumult at home and in the New World, seen its devastating effects through European wars and the subjugation of Indians. The knock-on effects had transformed English society, too. The expansion of market relationships and their power created ever more integrated systems and new ways of existing in those systems. Prices rose 600% in Britain between 1450 and 1600. Hythloday was right: landed gentry in England benefitted from the inflation while landless peasants and Indians abroad suffered. Domestic industries grew and populations concentrated in the economic center of London. Trade expanded and diversified in every direction. New means of employment and investment arose and fortunes were made. At the root of it all was New World gold and silver.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Raleigh, 53.

⁶⁸ These developments are thoroughly traced in Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

Yet colonization did not seem to be such an unstoppable force. Following the Protestant Elizabeth I's accession to the throne, the English embarked on a different course than the one proposed by Eden. She was reluctant to risk any investment in New World colonization, preferring—reasonably—to share in the quick scores of semi-private enterprise, which mostly meant piracy. The crown profited significantly from Hawkins's slaving expeditions, and supported his and Francis Drake's privateering against the Spanish. Drake's exploits in the 1570s and 80s, including his circumnavigation of the globe, were made possible because his prime directive was to target Spanish towns and treasure ships. This plunder risked few resources and could be extremely lucrative. He did claim some part of California for England in 1579, but it was hardly noticed by anyone in contrast to the loot stolen from Spanish ships, and the claim received essentially no subsequent interest. The first concerted attempt at New World colonization was undertaken by Humphrey Gilbert, Raleigh's half brother, who was given a patent by the Queen. He had to raise his own money, however, and relied on merchant investors and joint-stock companies to search for the Northwest Passage. Martin Frobisher made it to Baffin Island, where he and his crew were diverted by what turned out to be fool's gold. Two more attempts, and Gilbert's own attempt to plant a colony on Newfoundland, failed spectacularly. After Gilbert drowned on the return voyage, reputedly while reading a copy of More's *Utopia*, the patent to colonize the New World was transferred to Raleigh.

All of these men engaged in the smash-and-grab strategy of privateering. In contrast, New World colonization seemed a poor investment. And it was. The Virginia Company, a joint-stock company in which London merchants shared the return on their investments, never turned

a profit in its eighteen years.⁶⁹ The first North American colonies failed to meet their own basic necessities, let alone strike it rich. (The colonists all grew the cash crop of tobacco, neglecting to grow food for themselves.) There was also a moral dimension to the widespread reluctance to establish colonies, a result of a humanistic tradition that emphasized the degenerating effects of empire.⁷⁰ But as a constraint it generally held only so long as there did not seem enough gold to answer the objections. Thus the outpouring of promotional literature under Raleigh's aegis, from Amadas and Barlow's cheery reconnaissance report of Virginia to Hakluyt's Protestant- and mercantile-inflected magnum opus. Thus the near-total lack of state support for colonization in the sixteenth century and minimal support in the seventeenth.

Raleigh turned out to be right, though not for long after his death. He saw the immense power of this historical moment, visible in the previously unimaginable returns on investment the New World could produce as well as the widespread desire such prospects produced in his culture. He saw that gold was the focal point of such desires, but that other commodities offered similarly attractive potential. Harriot's *Brief and True Report* is at least as dedicated to the sources of timber, tobacco, and the (mistaken) likelihood of cultivating silk as it is to the customs and practices of the Algonquians. In the longer term, Kenneth Pomeranz argues, the "great divergence" between European and Chinese economies in the eighteenth century was largely due to Europe's close exchange relationships with the New World (in addition to coal), the materials

⁶⁹ Fitzmaurice 58, Elliott, 117.

⁷⁰ Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) makes a compelling case that humanist moral anxieties about conquest, colonization, and profit shaped the course of English colonization, including Raleigh's projects. See also David Armitage, "The Elizabethan Idea of Empire," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14, no. 14 (2004): 269–77. Anxieties of conscience also took hold in Spain. See Vilches, *New World Gold: Cultural Anxiety and Monetary Disorder in Early Modern Spain*.

that allowed for an ever more resource-intensive and labor-saving economy.⁷¹ And he saw that private enterprise could profit as successfully as state-directed ventures. The English mercantile economy would be built from the 1620s on by a generation of ambitious “new men” operating in competitive commercial markets that were effectively unregulated—a free-for-all.⁷² The last line of the *Discovery* offers the opportunity to possess the empire to the Queen, but subtly warns that it cannot remain an exclusive offer, for “if not, I will judge those men worthy to be kings thereof, that by her grace and leave will undertake it of themselves.”

Raleigh knew exceptionally well that he played a small (if outsized) part in a much larger play, and he expressed that wider frame throughout his writing. He himself had risen with the tide of these early modern upheavals.⁷³ The doubts he immediately faced from rivals at court—“whether [Guiana] pass for a history or a fable”—had to do with his being a socially mobile upstart. His particular expression of ethnographic empiricism is thus partly about proving the veracity of his account in reaction to this skepticism.⁷⁴ So too are his economic perceptions driven by necessity: the focus on commodities in Virginia stems from Spanish dominance of gold-producing regions; the turn to gold in Guiana is motivated by his perception that ventures that did not promise quick astronomical returns were diverted by ones that did (Frobisher’s fool’s

⁷¹ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷² Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities*, 180.

⁷³ Following in the wake of his half brother Humphrey Gilbert’s military and pirating exploits in Ireland and against Spain at sea, he rose to the level of Elizabeth I’s favorite through his success in the same colonial, military, wealth-appropriating roles. See Galloway, *Sir Walter Raleigh: Architect of Empire*.

⁷⁴ A great deal of scholarship focuses on Raleigh’s rhetorical strategies of proof. For a recent account, see Rachel Winchcombe, “Authenticating El Dorado: Frustrated Knowledge Production in Walter Raleigh’s Discoverie of Guiana,” *Itinerario* 43, no. 3 (2019): 443–65. See also Jonathan P. A. Sell, *Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing, 1560–1613* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

gold, piracy); the emphasis on private funding stems from the crown's lack of support. But the quality of Raleigh's ethnography—his complex understanding of other cultures—in turn produced friction between this perception of culture and the perception of the powerful economic forces of modernity. He observes that “the kings and lords of all the borders of Guiana had decreed that none of them should trade with any Christians for gold, because the same would be their own overthrow, and that for the love of gold the Christians meant to conquer and dispossess of them of all together.”⁷⁵ This was the situation through which he hoped to navigate. The narrative registers, through native perceptions of Europeans, the depredations of their economic ends as well as the hope that they might be reconciled. The experience of Indigenous cultures as they contended with the expressions of new colonial economies made clear the darker side of what was coming.

V.

Having at least touched on some of the ways Raleigh produces ethnographic representations that lead toward a sophisticated concept of culture, and perceives the great economic upheavals of modern capitalism as they had begun to be expressed in the early modern Atlantic, let us turn to an element of the narrative that brings these worlds together and generates their significance: myth. Again, the sense of “myth” that will be most useful to see in the *Discovery* is not the one usually alleged against the work—something that is not true—but the neutral anthropological sense that bears a more complex relationship to truth. To Claude Lévi-

⁷⁵ Raleigh, 69.

Strauss, still the most important theorist of myth in modern anthropology, myth is an expression of opposed binaries by which a culture is organized, created in language as a *bricolage* (something fashioned with “whatever is at hand”). The contradiction is located at the culture’s origins yet is still visible in the present, for “a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages—anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting.”⁷⁶ The oppositions stem from deep contradictions in a culture; the work of myth is to resolve them.

Raleigh’s *Discovery* should not be taken as a myth in its entirety. Rather, there are mythic elements bound up with the empirical perceptions, the suggestion that what he sees is an expression of a pattern set long ago. As Levi-Strauss writes, myth is a “science of the concrete,” a way of deriving cultural significance through perception of and interaction with the world. On the one side, Raleigh describes the Empire of Guiana as an unspoiled civilization and city of gold, qualities transferred from the people he meets along the way—the goodly favored Ciawani, or the untutored yet noble Topiawari. On the other is the rapacious Spanish Empire, whose depredations Raleigh describes in economic terms. They have introduced a slave trade in which “the Spaniards make great profit; for buying a maid of twelve or thirteen years for three or four hatchets, they sell them again at *Margarita* in the *West Indies* for fifty and a hundred *pesos*” (68). The astronomical financial returns that constitute the allure of New World colonization, and the motivation of Raleigh’s project, are found in the most horrific examples of modern European corruption. Raleigh’s ethnographic and economic interests are products of close observation, the places where the narrative most fully comes into contact with the real. They are related to each

⁷⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428–44, 430. For myth as “bricolage” and the “science of the concrete,” see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

other by a familiar contradiction set, as myths tend to be, in a primitive original past by which the present is made intelligible.

One response to the conflictual situation was George Herbert's, in a poem called "The Church Militant":

Then shall Religion to America flee:
They have their times of Gospel, ev'n as we.
My God, thou dost prepare for them a way
By carrying first their gold from them away:
For gold and grace did never yet agree:
Religion always sides with poverty.
We think we rob them, but we think amiss:
We are more poor, and they more rich by this.
Thou wilt revenge their quarrell, making grace
To pay our debts, and leave our ancient place
To go to them, while that which now their nation
But lends to us, shall be our desolation.⁷⁷

He sees a global historical pattern, a *translatio imperii* in which Christianity sweeps westward and leaves Europe behind to its decadent "desolation." The exchange that appears to advantage the Christians—the spoils of gold and silver—is in fact the reverse. The desire for gold is proof of corruption, foreshadowing the greater loss. Christianity is compensation for the theft, its benefits all the more realized through newfound poverty. Eden's solution (Christianity as side effect of European economic motivations) and Hakluyt's (mercantile colonialism as a Protestant effort to "recall the savage and the pagan to civility") offer variations on Herbert's attempt to reconcile the conflict that they all perceive in similar terms.

Raleigh, on the other hand, never reaches for religion: the nightmare is not conceived of as sin, the optimistic fantasy is not one of salvation.⁷⁸ The mythic qualities he evokes are

⁷⁷ George Herbert, "The Church Militant," in Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin, (New York: Penguin, 1991, rpt. 2004), 247–58.

⁷⁸ He does consider the religious dimension in his *Of the Voyage for Guiana*, a private state paper that focuses on strategy, but even here its role is unexpectedly tolerant. He explicitly argues that Christians

similarly primitivist, however, tied to a murky human past and closer to the golden age of pagan antiquity. The framework was ready-made in New World writing and even cultivated for Raleigh by others, including George Chapman's propagandistic "De Guiana, Carmen Epicum" (1596), which sees Raleigh himself as an agent to "Go forth upon the waters, and create / A golden world in this our iron age."⁷⁹ We even find in Raleigh's "maidenhead" passage an echo of Eden's *Decades*, which he introduces with his own treatise on gold metallurgy that evokes "the innocence of living in those days, when Mars was of no power, and men thought it cruelty by breaking the bones of our mother the earth, to open a way to the court of infernal Pluto, from thence to get gold and silver." Eden's collection repeats Peter Martyr's description that the natives of the West Indies live in "a golden world" and "that mine and thine (the seeds of all mischief) have no place with them."⁸⁰ And the reconnaissance report from Raleigh's own attempt to colonize Virginia, undertaken by Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe, includes the claim that "We found the people most gentle, loving, and faithfull, voide of all guile and treason, and such as live after the maner of the golden age."⁸¹

have no right to conquer pagans on the basis of religion, that they should feel no compunction about allying with and trusting them, that sacking and spoiling them as the Spanish do is unchristian, and that their conversion should happen gradually, without coercion. There were limits, however: he also characterizes the natives as ultimately needing to be "brought from their idolatry, bloody sacrifices, ignorance, and incivility." "Of the Voyage for Guiana" in *Sir Walter Raleigh's Discovery of Guiana*, ed. Joyce Lorimer, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate [Hakluyt Society], 2006), 253–64.

⁷⁹ George Chapman, *Plays and Poems*, ed. Jonathan Hudston, (New York: Penguin, 1998), 277–82, 30–2. For a reading of the poem and its classical myths in the context of English poetry about the New World, see David McInnis, "The Golden Man and the Golden Age: The Relationship of English Poets and the New World Reconsidered," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 13, no. 1 (May, 2007): 1–19.

⁸⁰ Pietro Martire d' Anghiera, *The Decades of the Newe Worlde Or West India*, trans. Richard Eden, 1555, 17.

⁸¹ Amadas would later be the one to shoot Pemisapan, the leader of the Roanokes. See Oberg, *The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand*, 97.

Where Raleigh can draw on the resonance of this myth, he often does. The emperor of Guiana, as we have seen, has created a corresponding world fashioned of gold. The Tivitivas, whom Raleigh does encounter, “never eat of anything that is set or sown; and as at home they use neither planting nor other manurance, so when they come abroad they refuse to feed of aught but of that which nature without labour bringeth forth.”⁸² The native women are “without deceit, stark naked.”⁸³ Raleigh describes his wonder at the landscape as nature tamed without human intervention, “as if they had been by all the art and labour in the world so made of purpose.” Conversely, the Spanish presence is all iron age corruption: on Trinidad, the Spaniard Berrio “had divided the island and given to every soldier a part”; they have drawn some Indians into their slave trade using economic enticements; they have enslaved and tortured caciques, which Raleigh describes in brutal detail; they have armed Topiawari’s sons and turned them against him, severing filial bonds and instigating civil war. It is important that these are not simply imaginative constructions, but grounded in the observable reality of 1580s Guiana. Raleigh noticed the gold, but the Spanish in Trinidad were also conducting an enormous pearl extraction operation in the coastal oyster fisheries that devastated the ecosystem, which depended on the reefs, and created a vicious system of slavery in which the Indians forced to dive for oysters in deadly conditions were considered expendable.⁸⁴ It is no wonder that many of the native Guianans welcomed Raleigh’s offer to oust the Spanish.

⁸² Raleigh, 74.

⁸³ Raleigh, 80.

⁸⁴ Molly A. Warsh, *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire, 1492–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

Without the saving grace of Christian conversion, how does Raleigh find his way out of this bind? He is fully aware of his iron age world. He understands it, at least on some level, as an infectious disease with the creation of property and love of gold at its source, the very things at which he aims. His solution is to pose himself as mediator between the Indians' golden world and his iron one. He imagines a complementary exchange in which the English become the defenders and possessors of Guiana, avoiding the depredations of the Spanish; the Indians retain their ancient liberty, the English receive the wealth and power they desire. To Raleigh, the Indigenous people have long histories and recent histories, and very much exist in the thick of present circumstances. His golden age myth reaches back to versions of prehistory, but its purpose and force is its location in the pivotal present, including the belief that the course may be corrected in the here and now. In conversing, allying, and living with native Guianans, in drinking their liquor and smoking their tobacco, in showing himself the Queen's good servant and offering a prize of gold, he attempts to adopt an identity that shares of both worlds.

But, he also saw, it is a quality of commercial exchange to draw everything into its web, to translate whatever it can touch into its own terms. There is no convincing way of avoiding the avarice and violence that attend his enterprise, just as there is no means of escape from the debasement figured in "The Lie." The Atlantic world has become a zero-sum game, "For whatsoever Prince shall possess it [Guiana], shall be greatest, and if the king of Spain enjoy it, he will become unresistable."⁸⁵ Part of the problem for Raleigh is that he acts only within much more powerful structures—the background radiation of the history of the world frequently shows

⁸⁵ Raleigh, 53.

through, as do the inescapable forces of modernity, let alone his frequent worries about what other men would do outside of his control.

In *The History of the World* Raleigh compares the geographer to the historian: the geographer fills blank spaces on the map with monsters, but he will eventually be found out; however, “in filling in the blanks of old histories, we need not be so scrupulous; for it is not to be feared that time should run backward, and, by restoring the things themselves to knowledge, make our conjectures appear ridiculous.”⁸⁶ Geography is the real, the discoverable material world accessible through activity and experience. History is essentially imaginative, requiring the narrative mechanisms of fiction to be represented and understood. It is presented here as a freedom, the ability to construct history according to one’s imagination without the threat that reality will intrude. The thing to worry about is what eventually did happen to Raleigh: that speculations about geographical reality, about the real-world results, will be found out to be mere follies. But in Guiana he is pursuing a dream that the two may be conflated, and that dream—he understands here—is impossible.

“It is not to be feared that time should run backward.” True enough, but that possibility is precisely what Raleigh’s mythic resolution requires. He proposes to walk back what iron age modernity has unleashed on the New World. Later on, as he sought another chance to prove himself in Guiana from his imprisonment, he writes of the motivation behind *The History of the World*, “that we plainly behold living now (as if we had lived then) that great world . . . as it was then, when but new to itself. By it [history] (I say) it is, that we live in the very time when it [the

⁸⁶ Raleigh, *The History of the World*, vol. 3, (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, 1820), 342.

world] was created.”⁸⁷ Raleigh does frame his journey to Guiana as an opportunity to reclaim the discovery “first offered her Majesty’s grandfather by *Columbus*.” But such desires exist because the imagined past is irretrievable; they are expressed because of the keen feeling of being swept along by the steady advance of the modern world.

The purpose of myth, to Lévi-Strauss, is to overcome a contradiction; it is, he writes, “an impossible achievement if, as it happens[,?] the contradiction is real.” Another variation on the myth is required to untie the knot (and another, and another, and another). The myth we should read in Raleigh’s *Discovery* is, instead, the Faustian bargain. Christopher Marlowe rendered the story at almost exactly the same time, creating a learned, aspiring cynic who desires spirits who will

Resolve me of all ambiguities,
Perform what desperate enterprise I will[.]
I’ll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the newfound world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.⁸⁸

Raleigh presents a Faustian bargain stripped of its drama of damnation, in which the only reward is the earthly gains, the only loss their earthly consequences. It was, of course, not only a mode of representation or perception. In the exploitation of New World gold, commodities, trading

⁸⁷ Raleigh, *History of the World*, 48. See also Nicholas Popper, *Walter Raleigh's “History of the World” and the Historical Culture of the Late Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁸⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 1.1.82–7. It is interesting that this drama of earthly possibilities and their inevitable failure is played out between Marlowe and Raleigh themselves in poetic form. To Marlowe’s proposals of idyllic possibility in “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” Raleigh responds with universal decay and disappointment in “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. B, 10th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, George Logan, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 678, 527.

networks, and people, Europeans really did find the keys that unlocked power of a previously unimaginable scope. Elsewhere Raleigh observes that “Whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.” What he sensed better than almost anyone was the epoch-making power of the moment, released by the collision of worlds.

Shakespeare's White Gods

I.

“Hast thou not dropped from heaven?” Caliban asks of Stefano, having tasted his wine for the first time. “I prithee, be my god.”¹ Shakespeare might have been inspired to imagine this first contact between the Neapolitans and the native islander by Columbus’s widely repeated report that the Indians he encountered were “convinced that we come from the heavens.”² Or he might have found a source in Vespucci, who describes how, “when they asked us whence we came, we answered that we had descended from heaven to pay the earth a visit.”³ He could have found similar stories in the narratives circulating about Cortés, who was said to have taken advantage of an Aztec prophecy about the return of the god-king Quetzalcoatl, or about Pizarro, Magellan, Drake, or Harriot in Virginia. Alternatives abound in the annals of European encounter with Indigenous New World peoples, so much so that attempting to locate a particular source is as futile as it is beside the point. But why is this scene there at all? Why is it so often repeated? What is its force—in Shakespeare’s theater, in the sites of New World contestation, and in the wider culture of the Renaissance?

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 2.2.127, 140.

² Christopher Columbus, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493*, ed. Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelly, Jr., (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 143.

³ Amerigo Vespucci, *Quatuor Americi Vespuccii Navigationes*, in *The Comosgraphiae Introductio of Martin Waldseemuller in Facsimile*, ed. C. G. Herbermann, trans. Mario E. Cosenza, (New York: U. S. Catholic Historical Society, 1907), 112.

In the century before Shakespeare began his writing career, what I will call the “myth of the white gods” was appropriated, established, and gained remarkable traction as an essential myth of the Renaissance.⁴The phenomenon exhibits a cynical instrumentality often found in European writing about the New World, the will to exploit any weakness in pursuit of unbounded desires. We might easily view the scene with Caliban as an expression of the coercive impulse behind the myth, present at even the first moments of encounter. When the native inhabitants of Jamaica stopped furnishing Columbus and his men with food, he warned them: if they continued to refuse him, God would show His imminent wrath that night by a sign

⁴ The myth has been discussed by many others, some of whom prefer the term “apotheosis.” Critical attention has been most focused on a few well-known episodes of encounter, especially on the Spanish and the Aztecs in Mexico and on James Cook in Hawaii in the Eighteenth Century, and has, in the past few decades, turned on the extent to which the myth should be seen as a European fabrication. Tzvetan Todorov’s account of Mexico has been influential and widely challenged, by David Carrasco and Camilla Townsend, among others. Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, revised ed., 2000), esp. Ch. 4, “The Return of Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire,” 148–204, and Ch. 5, “When Strangers Come to Town: The Return of Quetzalcoatl and Millennial Discourse,” 205–40, Townsend, “No One Said it was Quetzalcoatl: Listening to the Indians in the Conquest of Mexico,” *History Compass* 1 (2003): 1–14, Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003): 659–87. Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere contested the myth in a relatively high-profile set of books on Cook in Hawaii, discussed below. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), Marshall Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Evan Haefeli, “On First Contact and Apotheosis: Manitou and Men in North America,” *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 3 (2007): 407–43, provides a recent overview as it relates to an encounter between Henry Hudson and the Lenape in North America, also discussed below. William Hamlin has interpreted the myth alongside Renaissance literature, arguing that it is the product of European fantasy, in “Imagined Apotheoses: Drake, Harriot, and Raleigh in the Americas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, no. 3 (1996): 405–428, and Hamlin, “Making Religion of Wonder: The Divine Attribution in Renaissance Ethnography and Romance,” *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 18, no. 4 (1994): 39–51. Much of the most illuminating scholarship in this area has been done by historians of Indigenous America and historical anthropologists or ethnohistorians. See, for example, James Axtell, “Imagining the Other: First Encounters in North America,” in *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25–74, and Michael Leroy Oberg, “Gods and Men: The Meeting of Indian and White Worlds on the Carolina Outer Banks, 1584–1586,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 76, no. 4 (1999) 367–90.

in the moon.⁵ Columbus knew from his almanac of an approaching eclipse, and, when it occurred, asked God to spare the Indians if they continued to provision the Spaniards, which they did.

Stefano and Trinculo's delight at holding power over another being for once paints them suitably as opportunistic colonial adventurers looking to exploit Indians at every turn: their first thoughts are about taking him captive for profit as a gift for an emperor, or showing him at a fair. Caliban's incongruous perception of these low characters as gods, especially when tied to the naïve experience of intoxication, plays on a familiar comedy of errors in which the natives become dupes of the Europeans. He is, as Trinculo declares, "a most poor credulous monster," "A most ridiculous monster, to make a wonder of a poor drunkard." And Prospero, who claims to "have bedimmed / The noontide sun," like Columbus uses his tricks to cow the island's natives into serving him.⁶

⁵ The story is related in Fernando Colón, *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, trans. Benjamin Keen, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1959), 272–27, and Diego Mendez, "An account given by Diego Mendez in his will of some events that occurred in the last voyage" in *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus, with Other Original Documents, Relating to His Four Voyages to the New World*, trans. and ed. Richard Henry Major, (Hakluyt Society, 1847, rpt. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017).

⁶ *The Tempest*, 2.1.137, 156–7; 5.1.41–2. The literature on *The Tempest* in colonial context is vast. Useful overviews can be found in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, eds. *The Tempest: A Critical Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), as well as their introduction to *The Tempest*, Arden Third Series, ed. Vaughan and Vaughan, (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2011), Jyotsna G. Singh, *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2019), and Gerald Graff and James Phelan, eds. *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000). Seminal accounts include Stephen Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century," in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22–51, and Greenblatt, "Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Paul Brown, "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism," in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 48–71, Francis Barker and Peter Hulme, "'Nymphs and Reapers Heavily Vanish': The Discursive Con-Texts of *The Tempest*," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Routledge, 1985), 191–205, and Barbara Fuchs, "Conquering Islands: Contextualizing *The Tempest*," *Shakespeare*

But there is more to it than that, both in the development of the ethnographic myth and in its literary expression. If the myth is coercive, it is also a complex response to an extreme form of cultural difference that stretched the limits of intelligibility on both sides of the encounter. On the European side the basic operation is to imagine, “*This* is how we must look to someone who thinks like *that*.” The myth requires an imaginative projection into the perspective of someone from another culture—one who is recognized as drastically alien in habit of mind—in order to view oneself. The superiority Europeans take for granted is both affirmed and made monstrous in their elevation to human gods. And that superiority is, crucially, constructed as a false perception, a mistake in translation between cultures. While the fantasy flatters Europeans at the expense of the Indians, the fantasy comes at a cost: a rift is revealed to exist at the core of the Europeans’ own social and religious arrangements, a tension in their own systems to which few things in Renaissance culture could give voice.

II.

Yet to call this myth of the white gods a European myth is to obscure some of its peculiarities as a cultural phenomenon. For one, its origin in cross-cultural contact means that it has a life independent of its European iterations. In 1609, Henry Hudson’s search for the Northwest passage brought him to what is now New York harbor. The encounter with the Indigenous inhabitants of the area evidently supplied material as useful for Indian myth-history as it did for Europeans: the event was kept alive in the oral tradition of the Lenape and Mahican

Quarterly 48.1 (1997), 45–62, as well as several of the chapters in Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, eds., *The Tempest and Its Travels* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

peoples, producing a remarkably rich account from the Indigenous perspective. Recorded in 1800 by the Moravian missionary John Heckewelder, this detailed account can be traced to the 1640s, and is corroborated by a first-hand account from 1609.⁷ It is worth quoting at length.

A long time ago, when there was no such thing known to the Indians as people with a *white skin*, (their expression,) some Indians who had been out a-fishing, and where the sea widens, espied at a great distance something remarkably large swimming, or floating on the water, and such as they had never seen before. They immediately returning to the shore apprised their countrymen of what they had seen, and pressed them to go out with them and discover what it might be; some concluding it either to be an uncommon large fish, or other animal, while others were of opinion it must be some very large house. . . . [Others] arriving in numbers, and themselves viewing the strange appearance, and that it was actually moving towards them, . . . concluded it to be a large canoe or house, in which the great Mannitto (great or Supreme Being) *himself* was, and that he probably was coming to visit them. By this time the chiefs of the different tribes were assembled on York Island, and were counselling (or deliberating) on the manner they should receive their Mannitto on his arrival. Every step had been taken to be well provided with a plenty of meat for a sacrifice; the women were required to prepare the best of victuals; idols or images were examined and put in order; and a grand dance was supposed not only to be an agreeable entertainment for the Mannitto, but might, with the addition of a sacrifice, contribute towards appeasing him, in case he was angry with them. The conjurors were also set to work, to determine what the meaning of this phenomenon was, and what the result would be. . . . Between hope and fear, and in confusion, a dance commenced. While in this situation fresh runners arrive declaring it a house of various colours, and crowded with living creatures. It now appears to be certain that it is the great Mannitto bringing them some kind of game, such as they had not before; but other runners soon after arriving, declare it a large house of various colours, full of people, yet of quite a different colour than they (the Indians) are of; that they are also dressed in a different manner from them, and that one in particular appeared

⁷ See Haefeli, 415–19. The account is evidently a version of another sketchily documented in the seventeenth century. The Indigenous version of the event, an oral history shared by different groups living on the Hudson River, was first documented in 1650 by Adriaen van der Donck. Though Hudson was only one visitor in a number of encounters along the coast over decades, the two native accounts are consistent, and corroborate the events as recorded in 1609 by Robert Juet, one of Hudson’s officers on the voyage. Heckewelder’s version, from which I quote, was first recorded in a letter to Samuel Miller in 1800, “verbally in their own words, so as I have heard them repeat it upwards of 30 years ago, and even down to this summer, where they related it in the same words,” qtd. in Haefeli, 419. A revised version was first published in his *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States* (1819).

altogether red, which must be the *Mannitto* himself.⁸

This view of the scene widens the usual field of interpretation. The attribution of divinity is not a trick, but a way of making intelligible what seems utterly strange, even other-worldly.⁹ Or, in this case, perhaps not quite other-worldly: the stark division between mortal and spiritual worlds, as Europeans imagine it, is not part of the Lenape's world. In a fine recent account of the phenomenon, Evan Haefeli dispels some of the myths around first encounter and apotheosis through this episode. He finds that the European tendency to translate native experience into the "worship" of "gods" misunderstands the cultural significance of the episode.¹⁰ There were spiritual elements, certainly, but they were not the ones Europeans expected to see. While the Indians repeatedly note the difference in skin color, it occurs as one instance of a mode of perception that shows a heightened cognizance of color amid an uncertain searching after meaningful signs: the others arrive, perhaps, in a "house of various colors," swimming or floating; the house is full of people, or creatures; among them is one who "appeared altogether

⁸ I quote from Heckewelder's original letter from 1800, published in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society*, 2nd ser., vol. 1, (New York, 1841), 71–4. More of Heckewelder's ethnography can be found in Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States*, ed. William C. Reichel, (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1876).

⁹ "Other-worldly" may be the wrong term, for it implies a separation between the earthly world and the spiritual world that does not exist in the Lenape cosmos. Haefeli writes, "A better way of understanding *Manitou*—the word interpreted as 'god'—is to turn to Algonquian understandings of how the world works. As A. Irving Hallowell and others have stressed, Western/Christian ideas of a division between the natural and supernatural, secular and religious, heaven and hell, simply do not apply. Instead, Algonquian peoples (like the Lenapes and Mahicans who met Hudson) saw the world in terms of relations between persons—some human, others 'other than human' who could assume various forms, including humans, animals, lightning, and thunder. Other-than-human persons could be sources of power and knowledge but also trouble and danger." Haefeli, 421. Joyce E. Chaplin notes, however, that "Both [English and Algonquian] cultures recognized difference between spirit and matter yet proposed connections between them." Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 282.

¹⁰ Haefeli, 434.

red,” evidently the Mannitto, who might be “angry with them” and should be appeased, just in case.

In its use of “Mannitto,” (*Manitou*) the account registers both the perils of colonial mediation (e.g. Heckewelder’s interposed gloss, “great or Supreme Being”) and a glimpse into a system of spiritual-natural belief typically obscured in European accounts of Indigenous religion. This perspective is the cloth from which European accounts are cut, though mistakes and manipulations inevitably transform it into something else. *Manitou* here is better translated as “power” and understood to exist in a universe suffused with it; Hudson was one endowed with a power beyond what humans normally possess.¹¹ He may be providing game, as *Manitous* did, or he may be there to punish some offense. The relationship between humans and *manitou* is fundamentally reciprocal, a kind of diplomacy that encompasses both humans and cosmic forces. From the very first moments of the Europeans’ arrival, the Indians’ discussions and preparations display an intense focus on the nature of the strangers’ power. The councils, the sacrifice, the grand dance, the conjurors, the idols: all available resources have been marshaled to understand what was inscrutable about the visitors, to access and influence it if they could.

The account goes on to register a fine-grained description of the Lenape’s negotiations with this power when, during their tense initial meeting, Hudson offers the chiefs “a substance.”

The (expected) Mannitto drinks; has the glass filled again, and hands it to the chief next to him to drink. The chief receives the glass, but only smelleth at it, and passes is on to the next chief, who does the same. The glass thus passes through

¹¹ For the Algonquian concept of *manitou*, see Haefeli, “On First Contact and Apotheosis,” as well as Oberg, “Gods and Men,” Chaplin, *Subject Matter*, and Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500–1643*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Oberg writes that *Mantoac*, the analogous word among the Carolina Algonquians, “represented a mysterious, immediate, and pervasive power beyond and greater than that of humans. It could manifest itself in animals, in people, and in things, all with the ability to impact dramatically the lives of human beings.” Oberg, *The Head in Edward Nugent’s Hand: Roanoke’s Forgotten Indians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 29.

the circle without the contents being tasted by any one; and is upon the point of being returned to the red-clothed man, when one of their number, a spirited man and great warrior jumps up—harangues the assembly on the impropriety of returning the glass with the contents in it; that the same was handed them by the Mannitto in order that they should drink it, as he himself had done before them; that this would please him; but to return what he had given to them might provoke him, and be the cause of their being destroyed by him. And that, since he believed it for the good of the nation that the contents offered them *should* be drunk, and as no one was willing to drink it *he would*, let the consequence be what it would; and that it was better for one man to die, than a whole nation to be destroyed. He then took the glass and bidding the assembly a farewell, *drank it off*. Every eye was fixed on their resolute companion to see what an effect this would have on him, and he soon beginning to stagger about, and at last dropping to the ground, they bemoan him. He falls into a sleep, and they view him as expiring. He awakes again, jumps up, and declares that he never felt himself before so happy as after he had drank the cup. Wishes for more. His wish is granted; and the whole assembly soon join him, and become intoxicated.¹²

The “substance” contains the threat of a dangerous spiritual power; the Mannitto’s offer constructs a perilous trap in which any choice might bring destruction. And in fact, once it has been drunk, the anticipated magical effects over human flesh do take hold. With dramatic flare, the worst comes to pass. The slow dread of uncertainty as the cup is passed around the circle is punctuated by the warrior’s heroic sacrifice. Then: he jumps up! The tragic moment has become bliss—for the warrior, for the other chiefs, for the audience.

We see in this scene the comedy of errors that so often attends instances of cross-cultural encounter: the comedy of Caliban’s plot is a distillation of an impulse, common to much travel writing, to find humor in cultural misreading.¹³ But it is apparent in this rendering that the comedy rests on the tension inherent in meeting another whose status and signifying systems are all but impenetrable. The stakes are almost unbearably high—the destruction of a whole nation—

¹² Heckewelder, 72–3.

¹³ See James Axtell, “Humor in Ethnohistory,” in *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 171–94.

until they suddenly are not. There is, instead, a release from the pressure built up by the interpretive blockages throughout the preceding tale. The account shares something of the bare structure of Shakespearean comedy in its flirtation with mortal danger that disperses into festivity. Yet what is menacing about the encounter does not simply disappear. It dissipates only to gather again as a mass of dark clouds in the distance. As everyone involved in the subsequent telling is aware, the story of the Mannitto *is* about an exceptional, destructive power. The story itself, an oral history told through generations, is another attempt to make it intelligible.

As in one of Columbus's first interactions with the Taino in the Caribbean, where he "showed them swords and they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves," the scene proleptically envisions the destructive consequences of the encounter in the form of a comic misapprehension.¹⁴ In both instances, the fraught material exchange goes slightly wrong, and the cultural gap that is revealed is understood, retrospectively, as an opening that Europeans will ruthlessly exploit. The Europeans' insidious use of alcohol to manipulate and subject Indians has been more than recognized by the time the oral history is recorded.¹⁵ Hence the scene, with its elaborate account of the Lenape's unfounded suspicion of danger in their mistakenly divine visitors' drink, evinces the strong undercurrent that is the much broader, and ongoing, colonial situation.

The event seems to have made a particular impression, too, on the European members of Hudson's voyage, for Robert Juet, an officer aboard the ship, recorded the event in considerable detail relative to the skeletal account of their other encounters. As Juet depicts them, the

¹⁴ Columbus, *Diario*, 67.

¹⁵ See Peter Mancall, *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Europeans' encounters with Indians along the coast occur within a cloud of paranoia. Over and over, he notes how the crew "kept good watch for feare of being betrayed by the people," how they perceived the Indians "in shew of buying of knives to betray us; but we perceived their intent," and how they "drave the *Savages* from their Houses, and took the spoyle of them, as they would have done of us."¹⁶ Their meeting with the Lenape is shaped from the beginning by this suspicion:

our Master and his Mate determined to trie some of the chiefe men of the Countrey, whether they had any treacherie in them. So they took them downe into the Cabbin, and gave them so much Wine and *Aqua vita*, that they were all merrie. . . . In the end one of them was drunke, which had been aboard of our ship all the time that we had beene there; and that was strange to them; for they could not tell how to take it.¹⁷

Having become drunk, one of the visiting party falls asleep and remains on board while the others leave. Juet then records the following "diplomatic incident," as Haefeli puts it, "the gravity of which completely escaped the Europeans": uncertain about their companion's condition, the Indians return to offer tobacco, beads, venison, and give an oration.¹⁸ On both sides of the encounter the experience of maneuvering through the fog of unfamiliar cultural signs, the need to register and release the tension produced by the meeting, the irreducible strangeness of the whole affair, found expression most readily in the experience of intoxication. Thus the name Manhattan, Heckewelder is informed, from *Mannahatanink*, "the island or place of general intoxication."¹⁹

¹⁶ Robert Juet, "The third Voyage of Master Henrie Hudson toward Nova Zembla," in Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, (London: William Stansby, 1625), 586, 592, 585–6.

¹⁷ Juet, 593.

¹⁸ Haefeli, 430.

¹⁹ The designation Manhattan originates in Juet; this etymology derives from Heckewelder's account of his Indigenous source. There is good reason to doubt this etymology, though its apparent afterlife in the

The pairing of these accounts—rare, exceptionally fortunate—allows us to see something important about the dynamic at work in the myth of the white gods: it is, at its very core, a mutual creation. As imbalanced as the encounters and accounts often are, as brimming with deceit, projection, malice, and misrepresentation, the acts of interpretation and imagination involved in the creation of the myth are based on the perceptions, real and imagined, of another who is engaged in the same acts. The Lenape must decipher the meaning of accepting, or not accepting, the Mannitto’s potentially deadly drink; the Europeans must divine the significance of the Indians’ oration and offerings, oscillating between their expectations of extreme innocence or treachery. What is more, the myth is only a particularly acute instance of a dynamic at work in all encounters with cultural difference and all writing that attempts to represent it. Recognizing the mutual creation of this myth should in turn allow us to recognize how all cultures are created not in isolation but from dynamic, hybrid situations, from cultural encounters that always takes place “Between hope and fear, and in confusion.”²⁰

The narrative impulse evident in the Lenape’s creation of anxiety, tragic false ending, and cathartic resolution appears as a particularly powerful way of rehearsing and interpreting a pivotal experience of cultural encounter. The complex dynamic of intense observation, misreading, distortion, symbolization, suspicion, and wonder illuminates and is illuminated by the imaginative art of the theater, for the same tangle of cultural interpretation finds perhaps its most profound expression on the early modern stage, and particularly in Shakespeare.

Delaware oral tradition is just as significant. See Ives Goddard, “The Origin and Meaning of the Name ‘Manhattan,’” *New York History* (2010): 277–93, which concludes the word means “the place where we get bows.”

²⁰ Heckewelder, 72.

“What have we here,” asks Trinculo, “a man or a fish? Dead or alive?”²¹ Caliban engenders the conjunction of wonder and confusion common to both ethnography and theater, and which is the source of the myth of the white gods. When Trinculo and then Stephano happen upon him, they cannot quite make out what it is they see. Trinculo provisionally settles on “no fish, but an islander that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt.”²² But even so the play does not allow the question to remain settled: when Stephano arrives he finds “four legs and two voices—a most delicate monster!” that turns out to be Trinculo (“the lesser legs”) and Caliban together under one gaberdine, though the impression lingers on after the two are untangled; he is a “dead mooncalf,” a monstrosity that suggests an unformed mass; he is “legg’d like a man and his fins like arms”; “half a fish and half a monster”; and he is, in Prospero’s first and last descriptions of him, “not honored with / A human shape,” a “thing of darkness.”²³ Epithets that are not meant as physical descriptors nevertheless affix themselves to the visual imagination: “tortoise,” “whelp,” “puppy-headed.”²⁴ Most of all, he is a monster—a “scurvy monster,” a “ridiculous monster,” an “abominable monster”—because he provokes the very theatrical effect of appearing hybrid, copious, and indistinct.²⁵

Caliban is unsettlingly perceptible, poised between the visible and imagined. He is thus an exaggerated version of all theatrical representations. “Was this the face that launched a

²¹ *The Tempest*, 2.1.24.

²² *The Tempest*, 2.1.34–5.

²³ *The Tempest*, 2.1.83, 97, 102–3, 31–2, 3.3.26–27, 1.1.283–4, 5.1.278.

²⁴ *The Tempest*, 1.2.316, 1.2.283, 2.2.145.

²⁵ *The Tempest*, 1.2.146, 156, 149. The word “monster” appears forty-six times in the play.

thousand ships?"²⁶ Yes and no: the figure on the stage is at once Helen of Troy and a young boy in women's clothing. A monster—related to the Latin *monstrare*, to show—is in this sense not quite the thing it is supposed to be. There is some disjunction between outward appearance and categorical identity, such that the established categories—and the cultural machinery that creates them—are found wanting.²⁷ Caliban is of interest to Stephano and Trinculo because of their inability to pin down what he is like, but perhaps even more because they can arrogate some of the strange effects of his monstrosity to themselves:

Were I in England now (as once I was) and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.²⁸

²⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 5.1.90.

²⁷ Ania Loomba argues that “if Caliban evokes aspects of African as well as Native American identities, it is not because these two were represented as identical, but because the play participates in and mediates between several different discourses of travel and otherness. Because at this time several distinct vocabularies of difference emerged from the various itineraries of European travel and then merged, sometimes uneasily, on the stage, such discursive interplay lies at the heart of Renaissance theatre.” Ania Loomba, “Shakespeare and Cultural Difference,” in *Alternative Shakespeares*, vol. 2, ed. Terence Hawkes, (London: Routledge, 1996), 172. See also Julia Reinhardt Lupton, “Creature Caliban.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2000): 1–23. One of the ways in which human differences were explored was the early modern discourse of monstrosity, on which a great deal of work has been done in the past two decades. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998) remains the authoritative account. See also Surekha Davies, “The Unlucky, the Bad and the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Peter G. Platt, ed. *Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Culture*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), Jeffery Jerome Cohen, ed. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, eds., *Monstrous Bodies/ Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

²⁸ *The Tempest*, 2.1.26–31.

“There would this monster make a man.” Like the implied commensurability of the Indian and English beggar, Trinculo’s turn of phrase draws together two referents into one. The monster at the English fair establishes the one who shows him as a man by bringing in money, but there is in the repetition also a faint suggestion that both Caliban and Trinculo could gain full humanity by the attachment.²⁹

The fair, like the theater, is a designated space of carnivalesque inversion, an arena in which certain fantasies could be temporarily bodied forth.³⁰ Among those fantasies is the sense that there is a wider compass of humanity than can usually be recognized, alien in form or culture. It brings to the center, out of a desire for the strange, people and things on the outer edges of normal understanding, while revealing that there is something of the “strange beast” in everyone.³¹ And intoxication is a key element of this festivity: it produces the same distorted effects, giving expression to the most liminal aspects of the self. “Thy eyes are almost set in thy head,” Stephano says of Caliban, using a colloquial expression for drunkenness, to which Trinculo replies, “Where should they be set else? He were a brave monster, indeed, if they were

²⁹ Arthur F. Kinney argues that the New World sources of *The Tempest* should extend beyond written narratives and include the presence of Indians in London, for example the five Algonquian men brought from Virginia in 1605. Arthur F. Kinney, “Revisiting *The Tempest*,” *Modern Philology* 93, no. 2 (1995): 161–177. In fact, there were Indians in London throughout Shakespeare’s career, as explored in Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Chapter 3, above.

³⁰ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). See also Ronald Knowles, ed. *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), though it does not discuss *The Tempest*.

³¹ Cf. Ben Jonson’s preface to *Bartholomew Fair*, “When’t comes to the Fair once, you were e’en as good go to Virginia, for anything there is of Smithfield,” *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8–9.

set in his tail.”³² Again, a non-descriptive image is impressed uncertainly onto the audience’s imaginative perception of Caliban’s form. His theatrical monstrosity is bound up with the wine-soaked tenor of his subplot, and with the mistaken fantasy of divinity it provokes: “That’s a brave god, and bears celestial liquor,” Caliban says, of Stefano and his wine, “I will kneel to him.”³³

For the king and his band, too, the world of the island continually widens the scope of possibility. Seeing the “strange shapes” that prepare Prospero’s conjured banquet, Sebastian declares that he will now credit unicorns and the phoenix, Antonio that “Travellers ne’er did lie, / Though fools at home condemn ‘em,” and Gonzalo adds his own expression of wonder:

If in Naples
I should report this now, would they believe me?
If I should say I saw such islanders
(For certes, these are people of the island),
Who though they are of monstrous shape, yet note
Their manners are more gentle, kind, than of
Our human generation you shall find
Many—nay, almost any.³⁴

Caught up in the magic of the island, the Europeans blend ethnography with the wonders of the imagination. The conjoined extremes of ethnographic expectation in the “monstrous shape” of the “islanders,” and their pure and gentle “manners,” are an expression of the primitivist sensibility behind the myth of the white gods, and thus behind Caliban’s crucial role in the play.

³² *The Tempest*, 3.2.7–10.

³³ *The Tempest*, 2.1.107–9.

³⁴ *The Tempest*, stage directions, 3.2.27–28, 28–33.

But when it comes time to eat the “islanders’” food, Alonso demurs: “Will’t please you taste of what is here?” “Not I.”³⁵ Gonzalo does not manage to convince the king that it is safe, but he relents anyway: “I will stand to and feed / Although my last.”³⁶ The Lenape warrior’s acceptance of Hudson’s drink, “as no one was willing to drink it *he would*, let the consequence be what it would,” is an intense moment of crossing over into another’s opaque—and potentially otherworldly—cultural system. It is a moment that *The Tempest* stages again and again, to various effect. “O brave new world / That hath such people in it!”: Miranda enters a social world entirely new to her, at first taking Ferdinand for “a thing divine”; Caliban accepts a new political theology in following Stephano; Ferdinand submits to the strange patriarchal authority of the island so as to win the “goddess” Miranda; Ariel imagines what it is like to feel “were I human” and is eventually granted the freedom of self-direction; Prospero drowns his books to return to the world of the Milanese court, seeking his own freedom by stepping out from the fiction into the world of the theater.³⁷

The play’s marvelous and exotic elements, its strange shapes and monsters, engender flights of fantasy whose effect is to bring us, in turn, to the radically concrete. This is one effect of putting Caliban on stage, of compelling us, alongside the other characters, to perceive him. Yet what we find in Caliban is his own strange, subtle, and intense way of looking—looking back, but also simply looking around. Stephen Greenblatt describes Caliban’s language in the following verse as indicating the “*opacity*” of his independently constructed world, a mark of the fundamental cultural difference that Shakespeare recognized and with which he carefully

³⁵ *The Tempest*, 3.2.43.

³⁶ *The Tempest*, 3.2.50–51.

³⁷ *The Tempest*, 5.1.83–84, 1.2.17.

endowed Caliban.³⁸ Even as it bestows dignity and success on Prospero, the play invites us to see the world that we are temporarily inhabiting from the particular and alien perspective, sensitively drawn, of its monstrous other:

I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow;
And I with my long nails will dig thee pignuts,
Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble marmoset. I'll bring thee
To clust'ring filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee
Young scamels from the rock. Wilt thou go with me?³⁹

III.

“I prithee, be my god.” If Caliban’s reception of Stefano as a deity is a comic misapprehension, it also reveals something about the world as Europeans see it. The construction plays on and justifies an assumption of natural European superiority, reifying deep-seated ideas of racial hierarchy and fulfilling a desire to exert power over others. Yet if part of the point is that Stefano and Trinculo are clearly not gods, that it is a foolish mistake to think so, we cannot say the same of Prospero. He is as close to a human god of power as ever appears on the early modern stage, creating and controlling the tempest, conjuring spirits, claiming to raise the dead. And if we are primed to see Caliban’s attribution of divinity to Stefano as the rehearsal of a joke at the credulous native’s expense, how are we to take Prospero? Like Faustus declaring that “A sound magician is a mighty god,” Prospero is the embodiment of a certain Renaissance view of

³⁸ Greenblatt, “Learning to Curse,” 43.

³⁹ *The Tempest*, 2.2.158–63.

human achievement—one that enjoyed particular prominence on the early modern stage because he channeled the particular ambitions and anxieties of his culture.⁴⁰

This magical figure sat somewhat uneasily within a Renaissance culture devoted to a conception of the Christian cosmos glimpsed in the play's first scene: "Use your authority!" cries the Boatswain, ironically, to the noblemen onboard who suggest that human hierarchies still matter against a storm under the Christian God's control. Most onboard retreat "To prayers! To prayers!" and Gonzalo concedes their powerlessness in the face of God: "The wills above be done, but I would fain die a dry death."⁴¹ Prospero himself gives due deference to the aloof God who shapes all human and natural affairs: "How came we ashore?" Miranda asks; "By providence divine."⁴² He recognizes, in the epilogue, that "my ending is despair / Unless I be relieved by prayer."⁴³ And Caliban ends the play having renounced his false god in order to instead "seek for grace."⁴⁴

But whose grace? The religious conversion of the Indians was foremost on the minds of many European colonists in the New World, though the aim was usually indistinguishable from submission, under threat of violence, to European authority. And there is nothing to indicate that

⁴⁰ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 1.1.64. Caliban's monstrous nature is bound up with the god-like nature of Prospero. In Marjorie Garber's structuralist reading of "the elements which constitute its basic fable . . . We discover that the play is about a human artist-magician whose time is divided between the locking up of monster-men (Caliban, the high and low conspirators), and the freeing of godlike men (Ferdinand, Miranda, Prospero himself, even by license Ariel)." Marjorie Garber, "The Eye of the Storm: Structure and Myth in Shakespeare's *Tempest*," *The Hebrew University Studies in Literature* 8 (1980): 28.

⁴¹ *The Tempest*, 1.1.45, 61.

⁴² *The Tempest*, 1.2.158–59.

⁴³ *The Tempest*, Epilogue, 15–16.

⁴⁴ *The Tempest*, 5.1.297.

Caliban is thinking of anything except a way to avoid the pinches and cramps to which Prospero habitually subjects him. So too the forgiveness Prospero seeks by prayer is most immediately that of the play's audience, who hold him on the island by their "spell."⁴⁵ The play never quite gets around to endorsing unequivocally the cosmic order we understand it to endorse. The brilliance of the opening tempest scene is that the chaotic and dazzling theatrical effects point toward a universal power that transcends the hierarchical expressions of human power—"What cares these roarers for the name of king?"—only to pull back the frame to reveal, instead, the very human Prospero behind it all.⁴⁶

This representation of Prospero as possessing beyond-human powers is not only an iteration of the Renaissance magus; it is there at all because it rehearses a commonplace about what Europeans seem to look like to someone like Caliban.⁴⁷ Moreover, the construction of the Renaissance magus—the alchemy, the Egyptian Hermeticism, the flirtation with heresy—is derived from idea that the newly-expanded globe and the actively-sought infusion of other cultures opened up new avenues for realizing human potential.⁴⁸ And by placing this magus

⁴⁵ *The Tempest*, Epilogue, 8.

⁴⁶ *The Tempest*, 1.1.15–16.

⁴⁷ Stephen Greenblatt's argument in "Invisible Bullets" is largely based on Thomas Harriot's perception of Algonquian religious responses to the English—including their taking them for gods—as a distant model by which to think through the interrelation of religion and political power. The alien culture, and what appeared to be its susceptibility to religious manipulation, becomes an arena for subversive thoughts that could not be directly applied to Christian European culture: "The recording of alien voices, their preservation in Harriot's text, is part of the process whereby Indian culture is constituted as a culture and thus brought into the light for study, discipline, correction, transformation. The momentary sense of instability or plenitude—the existence of other voices—is produced by the monological power that ultimately denies the possibility of plenitude, just as the subversive hypothesis about European religion is tested and confirmed only by the imposition of that religion" Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 37.

⁴⁸ See Barbara A. Mowat, "Prospero, Agrippa, and Hocus Pocus," in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's The Tempest*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, (New York : G.K. Hall , 1998), 193–

figure here, amid the many evocations of exotic New World wonders, by embedding him within a colonial discourse of nature and culture, civilization, barbarism, and slavery, Shakespeare makes visible the way certain fantasies of Renaissance culture rely on the spectral presence of difference that lies outside the identity European culture fashions for itself. Prospero may be a familiar figure in this Renaissance culture, but there is no one quite like Caliban in what survives from the early modern theater. What is crucial, in my view, is not whether Prospero is being affirmed or critiqued as colonist or humanist or prince, but rather that we see the magus and his particular power through a filter of cultural difference: the world as Caliban sees it. Prospero's status on the island—and the nature of his power—is constructed out of a peculiar consideration of a kind of native religion. Aboard the ship, the Christians' world is not a world in which humans mingle with gods, or share their qualities; Caliban's is. The storm is Prospero's; the play's world is Caliban's.

This is not entirely true, of course. The pervasive Christianity of Shakespeare's culture could convincingly claim to absorb all of the play's potentially destabilizing elements: Prospero abjures his rough magic and drowns his books, Christian forgiveness wins out against revenge, sweeping up Caliban in paternal acknowledgment, and, anyway, Caliban's view of things is safely ensconced in a despised character who poses no real threat. His insurrection is nearly forgotten, and dispatched with little effort when it arrives. The play does not have to endorse the prevailing Christian order, and in fact an endorsement may concede too much to the possibility that there is any alternative worth taking seriously.

214, Mowat, "Prospero's Book," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2001): 1–33, Stephen Orgel, "Secret Arts and Public Spectacles: The Parameters of Elizabethan Magic," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 68, no. 1, (2017): 80–91, and Denise Albanese, "Admiring Miranda and Enslaving Nature," in *New Science, New World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 59–91.

Even so, Shakespeare does seem to take Caliban's alien religion seriously enough. "The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not."⁴⁹ This world is particularly Caliban's, and it is, in its quiet expansiveness, the fictional world the play makes for us. Shakespeare draws Caliban's individual relation to the strange natural and supernatural character of the island, and the way these forces are ever entwined with its social world, with enough sensitivity and depth to have an outsized influence over the play.⁵⁰ What may appear to be an incidental diversion—Caliban's mistake—in fact permeates the play, shaping everything that happens.

Caliban's native religion—another detail that may easily be overlooked—helps to establish the crucial atmospheric and imaginative setting of the island, signifying more than anything else in the play that this world is the one imagined by New World ethnography. Shakespeare gives Caliban a native god from the South American land of monsters, taken from Antonio Pigafetta's account of Magellan's circumnavigation. Pigafetta records the kidnapping of two Patagonian natives who, when they realize their captivity, "roared like bulls, and cried upon their great devil Setebos, to help them."⁵¹ The episode also includes a familiar scene: "When he sawe the capitayne with certeyne of his company abowte hym, he was greatly amased and made

⁴⁹ *The Tempest*, 3.3.128–29.

⁵⁰ Robert Browning's *Caliban Upon Setebos* and other subsequent re-imaginings of Caliban's perspective are constructed on this premise, but it should be noted that the opening is richly populated by the original as well. See Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), as well as their introduction to the Arden *Tempest*.

⁵¹ Antonio Pigafetta, "A briefe declaration of the viage or navigation made about the worlde," in *The history of trauayle in the West and East Indies*, ed. Richard Willes, trans. Richard Eden, (London, 1577), 434.

signes holdynge vppe his hande to heauen, signifyinge therby that owre men came from thense.”⁵²

As Caliban establishes his role in the play by lamenting his own captivity, Prospero threatens to “make thee roar, / That beasts shall tremble at thy din.” Caliban privately capitulates, reminding himself about Prospero’s hold over him:

I must obey. His art is of such power
It would control my dam’s god Setebos
And make a vassal of him.⁵³

Though human, Prospero is elevated by his magic to the level of native deity. Caliban’s justified preoccupation with power relations and vassalage is interwoven with an explicitly religious view of the cosmic order, a view that helps to create the play’s representation of its local god, Prospero.

Caliban’s religion is an extension of a question the play is unusually invested in exploring: what would it be like to live on this island? What ways of comprehending the world does such a place provoke? In their own fashions, most of the characters provide answers: Gonzalo sees untroubled abundance, Antonio and Sebastian see a Hobbesian struggle for advantage, and so on. But these are fantasies projected from civilization. Like Miranda, Caliban has no other frame of reference than the island, no understanding of humanity in which godlike power does not course through individuals and permeate the natural world.⁵⁴ Again and again,

⁵² Pigafetta, 434.

⁵³ *The Tempest*, 1.2.371–73.

⁵⁴ On Caliban and Miranda as figures who share a New World experience, see John Gillies, “The Figure of the New World in *The Tempest*,” in *“The Tempest” and Its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, (London: Reaktion, 2000), 180–200.

the strange circumstances of Miranda's life are shown to govern her experience of the play's events:

This
Is the third man that e'er I saw, the first
That e'er I sighed for

I do not know
One of my sex; no woman's face remember,
Save, from my glass, mine own; nor have I seen
More that I may call men than you, good friend,
And my dear father:

I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.⁵⁵

This is also, crucially, Caliban's experience: "I never saw a woman, / But only Sycorax my dam and she."⁵⁶ And Sycorax, Prospero relates, "was a witch, and one so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs."⁵⁷ She dies, leaving Caliban entirely alone, with only the island and its spirits. Alone, that is, until Prospero arrives with his infant daughter, wielding his own magic, sending his own "potent ministers," "spirits," "demi-puppets," and "elves" about the island to effect the invisible work of nature, showing Caliban humane kindness and then extreme cruelty.⁵⁸ These three, this power, and the island itself are all Caliban has ever known.

It is unsurprising, then, that to Caliban there is no firm border between what has elsewhere been designated the natural and supernatural, between humans and his god Setebos.

⁵⁵ *The Tempest*, 1.2.443–45, 3.1.48–52, 1.2.16–18. Prospero adds, to Miranda: "Thou think'st there is no more such shapes as he, / Having seen but him and Caliban. Foolish wench, / To th' most of men this is a Caliban / And they to him are angels," 1.2.477–79.

⁵⁶ *The Tempest*, 3.2.94–95.

⁵⁷ *The Tempest*, 5.1.272–73.

⁵⁸ *The Tempest*, 1.2.275, 5.1.2, 5.1.33–36.

As Miranda marvels in the final scene at the “brave new world” and its “goodly creatures,” Caliban mirrors the shock of encountering even more humans: “O Setebos! These be brave spirits indeed!”⁵⁹ His encounter with Stefano and Trinculo, and his attribution of divinity to them, is couched also in aspects of his constricted experience. He first perceives Trinculo as “a spirit of his,” come “to torment me / For bringing wood in slowly.”⁶⁰ Such spirits inhabit the island, flitting between the external world and Caliban’s own innermost consciousness, an existence that Shakespeare captures as the uncertain moments in which dream and waking reality are interlaced:

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming
The clouds, methought, would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.⁶¹

He cannot trust them. He may have once, but these spirits of dream and nature, aesthetic pleasure, and hope, have been turned—unwillingly, Caliban claims—to Prospero’s pestiferous agents. “Thou dost me yet but little hurt,” he says to the spirit Stefano; “thou wilt anon, I know it by thy trembling. Now Prosper works upon thee.”⁶² This justified sense that his environment is in every part animated by forces to which his tyrannous ruler has sole access lies behind Caliban’s entire role. If our experience is one of dreamlike pleasure at the poetry and spectacle

⁵⁹ *The Tempest*, 5.1.264.

⁶⁰ *The Tempest*, 2.1.15–16.

⁶¹ *The Tempest*, 3.3.130–36.

⁶² *The Tempest*, 2.1.74–75. Caliban’s statement is also a flipped version of Alonso’s group’s perception of the spirits: where they perceive the spirits as human islanders, he perceives the human visitors as spirits.

conjured upon the bare island of the stage, Caliban's presence asks us to imagine these forces enlisted for more sordid purposes:

His spirits hear me
And yet I needs must curse. But they'll nor pinch,
Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me i' the mire,
Nor lead me, like a firebrand, in the dark
Out of my way, unless he bid 'em; but
For every trifle are they set upon me;
Sometime like apes that mow and chatter at me
And after bite me, then like hedgehogs which
Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount
Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I
All wound with adders who with cloven tongues
Do hiss me into madness.⁶³

His world is made up of the stuff of the island: hedgehogs (or urchin-shows), the mire, adders, bogs and fens, the blind mole. Both his hopeful and vengeful desires are expressed through its natural features, which are all shot through with a manipulable, spiritual power. Where once he had full reign of the island and shared it with Prospero, showing him “all the qualities o’ the isle, / The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile,” he is now confined to his rock, and the pain of betrayal is registered in the loss of these places.⁶⁴ Hence his promises to show Stefano and Trinculo what he has known before—“I’ll show thee every fertile inch o’ th’ island” and “the best springs; I’ll pluck thee berries; / I’ll fish for thee and get thee wood enough”— are part of an attempt to restore an experience of the island that is barred from him.⁶⁵

⁶³ *The Tempest*, 2.2.3–14.

⁶⁴ *The Tempest*, 1.2.337–8.

⁶⁵ *The Tempest*, 2.2.151–2. Monique Allewaert argues that Ariel's and Caliban's humanity is entangled with the natural world in a way that “anticipates the conjunction of the colonial natural world and colonized human beings . . . [which] makes possible a form of personhood that was particularly visible to subaltern beings in the colonies.” Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1–2.

The effect of pursuing this ethnographic question (what would it be like to live on this “poor isle”?) is to lend a sense of particularity and depth to Caliban’s construction of the world.⁶⁶ *The Tempest* works by spinning out ever more impressive visions of abundance and variety from a set of unusually constrained materials: a single setting, a single day, an especially short script, no major historical or literary source, all nearly unique in Shakespeare. If at first Caliban’s naïve religious impulse seems a somewhat callous joke at his expense, it can just as well serve as a foundation that governs even the most remote corners of the play: a view that is coherent enough, and strange enough, to give the play its tinge of imaginative magic. Caliban’s perception of Stefano as a god is only one element in a dream-like collage that renders, for a time, the whole invading European world as indistinct, shifting, and alien—a version of their indistinct perceptions of him. And so it is Caliban’s idiosyncratic understanding of divinity that reveals itself most conspicuously throughout the play, despite and because of its peculiar earthiness. When he and Trinculo get into a squabble, Caliban calls on his god Stefano for divine intervention: “Bite him to death, I prithee!”⁶⁷

IV.

If rendering Caliban’s religion so sensitively, and encompassing the play within a version of his view of things, in fact poses no real challenge to the prevailing orthodoxies of Renaissance England, what, then, is the point? Why act out such an elaborate version of the ethnographic

⁶⁶ *The Tempest*, 5.1.212.

⁶⁷ *The Tempest*, 3.3.31.

fantasy? A more extended exploration of the myth of the white gods, as it wound its way through New World ethnography and Renaissance culture more broadly, will help us toward an answer.

We should return, first, to the possibility that immediately presents itself—and, indeed, will not go away. That is, Prospero enacts a particular dream of authorial control over one’s surroundings toward which Europeans, and especially Europeans active in the New World colonial project, aspired.⁶⁸ Caliban’s fleshed out role in the play establishes the conditions for this fantasy in which one can exercise power over one’s racial and religious inferiors, as well as enemies, family, posterity, even one’s superiors, directing them all exactly the way one wishes. He can manipulate their beliefs as well as their actions, and he can create for himself precisely the role he desires. This fantasy is clearly at work also in the ethnographic expressions of the myth of the white gods, and is behind many of the entwined dreams of social leveling, mobility, and domination that attend New World writing.

The myth gained a firm hold on the Renaissance imagination because of its central role in one of the most spectacular, shocking, and all but unbelievable episodes of the era. In 1519, Hernán Cortés defies the governor of Cuba, setting out on a campaign of conquest.⁶⁹ Arriving on the mainland of Mexico, he is received by an Indian chief who says he governs in the name of

⁶⁸ William Hamlin finds, of the literary and ethnographic use of the apotheosis myth, that the “myth models . . . may be characterized as simultaneously enabling and limiting for those who draw upon them: limiting because they restrict perception and cognition, enabling because they can be deployed to buttress their adherents’ power.” Hamlin, “Imagined Apotheoses,” 407.

⁶⁹ J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 1–5. See also Inga Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty’: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico” in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 12–47.

the emperor Moctezuma II, ruler of the mighty Aztec empire whose seat is the dazzling city of Tenochtitlan. Cortés then leads a small band of men inland, gaining allies eager to revolt against the Aztecs and sparking terror along the way. As the Spaniards approach Tenochtitlan, Cortés reportedly takes steps to encourage what he gathered about the Indians' view of them: "Do you know, gentlemen," he says in Bernal Díaz del Castillo's account, "that it seems to me that that the Indians are terrified at the horses and may think that they and the cannon alone make war on them. I have thought of something which will confirm this belief."⁷⁰ And so, at a meeting with the leaders of the Tabasco region following a battle, he tells them that if they do not receive the Spaniards kindly,

some of those *Tepustles* would jump out and kill them (they call iron *Tepustle* in their language) for some of the *Tepustles* were still angry because they had made war on us. At this moment the order was secretly given to put a match to the cannon which had been loaded, and it went off with such a thunderclap as was wanted, and the ball went buzzing over the hills, and as it was midday and very still it made a great noise, and the Caciques were terrified on hearing it. As they had never seen anything like it they believed what Cortés had told them was true. Then Cortés told them, through Aguilar, not to be afraid for he had given orders that no harm should be done to them.⁷¹

A similar demonstrative trick is played at the same meeting with a stallion agitated at the scent of a mare. He amplifies what is unfamiliar and astounding about his group, and capitalizes on the effect by claiming authority over the powerful creatures that seem to attend him. In this case, he gains an ally.

Cortés continually makes use of spectacle to create strange, magical effects that inspire fear and awe among the Indians. Inga Clendinnen describes these as "plays," part of a

⁷⁰ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. David Carrasco, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 44.

⁷¹ Díaz del Castillo, 45.

“mystification program” that also included wildly cruel and unpredictable displays of violence.⁷² He deliberately encourages the idea that the Spanish were gods, at least in Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s retrospective account, as part of this strategy. “Do you know, gentlemen,” he says later, as if by the rhetorical repetition Díaz del Castillo wished to give the impression of both master strategy and improvisation, “that it seems to me that . . . the people here take us for gods or being like their idols. I am thinking that so as to make them believe that one of us is enough to defeat those Indian warriors, their enemies . . . that we will send Heredia against them.”⁷³ Heredia, an old veteran with a big beard, a scarred face with a distinctive twitch, a lame leg, and one blind eye, would—alone—join a band of Indians to attack a rival town, firing his musket along the way. Cortés and his men change course and join them before long, but the story that the Cempoalans “were bringing along a Teule to kill all the Mexicans” would spread.⁷⁴

In Tenochtitlan, meanwhile, the stories precede the strangers. An account of the scene is rendered in the *Florentine Codex*, a magnificent, poly-vocal account of native life in Mexico composed decades later by Nahua authors and artists trained at a priestly school and organized by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún. The informants, Sahagún claimed, “who helped write it were prominent elders, well versed in all matters, relating not only to idolatry but to government and its offices, who were present in the war when this city was conquered.”⁷⁵

Responding to news of a spectacle like the one above,

⁷² Clendinnen, 19, 29.

⁷³ Díaz del Castillo, 74–75.

⁷⁴ Díaz del Castillo, 75.

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Susan L. Cline, “Revisionist Conquest History: Sahagún’s Revised Book XII,” in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, ed. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quinones Keber, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 97. Cline argues that Sahagún did actively shape a later version for political reasons to emphasize the role of Cortés

Moctezuma was shocked, terrified by what he heard. He was much puzzled by their food, but what made him most faint away was the telling of how the great lombard gun, at the Spaniards' command, expelled the shot which thundered as it went off. The noise weakened one, dizzied one. Something like a stone came out of it in a shower of fire and sparks. The smoke was foul; it had a sickening, fetid smell. And the shot, which struck a mountain, knocked it to bits—dissolved it. It reduced a tree to sawdust—the tree disappeared as if they had blown it away.

What is more, “the animals they rode—they looked like deer—were as high as roof tops”; “they were iron” with iron weapons and iron head pieces; they had strange dress, strange hair, strange skin; their dogs had eyes that “blazed yellow, fiery yellow” and were spotted like jaguars.

Moctezuma, like his people, “assumed them to be gods.”⁷⁶

And not just any gods: it was Quetzalcoatl, “Our Young Prince, the Feathered Serpent,” the ancestral god-king of the Toltecs, who had returned to claim his ancient kingdom.

Moctezuma “thought, as everyone else did, that it surely was Quetzalcoatl who had returned as he had said he would when he set out eastward long ago, to resume the rulership from which he had been driven.” The Spanish had arrived in the year 1 Acatl, the calendar name of Quetzalcoatl and the same year in the cycle in which he was born and died. They arrived from the east, the same direction he had gone when he departed. For these reasons Cortés was identified—if uncertainly—with the god-king who long ago settled Tollan, established the city, and promised to return to reclaim his kingdom from those (the Aztecs) who had usurped it.⁷⁷

and the Franciscan order, but that this was a change from the account in the *Florentine Codex*, where the native perspective predominated with little to no intervention by Sahagún.

⁷⁶ Bernardino de Sahagún, *The War of Conquest: How It Was Waged Here in Mexico*, ed. and trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1978), 17–19.

⁷⁷ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, esp. Ch. 4, “The Return of Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire,” 148–204.

When, finally, Moctezuma and Cortés meet face to face, this mythic story plays out somewhere between the background and foreground. The document closest to the event seems to give credence to the Quetzalcoatl legend, attributing it to Moctezuma in a speech to Cortés. The account, however, is a letter to Charles V written by Cortés himself. Cortés reports Moctezuma's speech:

For a long time we have known from the writing of our ancestors that neither I, nor any of those who dwell in this land, are native of it, but foreigners who came from very distant parts; and likewise we know that a chieftain, of whom they were all vassals, brought our people to this region . . . [but he eventually] departed. And we have always held that those who descended from him would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals. So because of the place from which you claim to come, namely from where the sun rises, and the things you tell us of the great lord or king who sent you here, we believe and are certain that he is our natural lord, especially as you say that he has known of us for some time. So be assured that we shall obey you and hold you as our lord in place of that great sovereign of whom you speak.⁷⁸

The speech does not mention Quetzalcoatl by name or identify Cortés as a god, and the idea that the leader of the powerful Aztec empire, which had itself recently conquered an unprecedented swath of Mesoamerica, would preemptively donate his kingdom to a conquering foreign army has often been considered laughable.⁷⁹ Yet the narrative coincidences of this account—from the mythic invocation of an ancient ruler, to the directional proof of this identity—are remarkable.

Out of these entangled accounts (to which several more could be added) comes a robust tradition, amplified in the twentieth century, that sees Moctezuma's alleged reception of Cortés as the god-king Quetzalcoatl to be the result of the Spaniard's modern cunning coming up against Moctezuma's traditional Indigenous worldview. It has been a historiography useful to

⁷⁸ Hernán Cortés, "The Second Letter," in *Letters from Mexico*, trans. and ed. Anthony Pagden, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971, rev. 1986, rpt. 2001), 85–6.

⁷⁹ See also Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

both enemies of the Indians and their defenders. To Tzvetan Todorov, in one of the most influential narratives of the conquest, “by his mastery of signs, Cortes ensures his control over the ancient Mexican empire.”⁸⁰ The conquistador is preternaturally adept at the semiotic practices of literate modernity, adaptation and improvisation, and self-consciously employs them against Moctezuma. The key to the Spaniards’ triumph is precisely Cortés’s recognition of, and participation in, the Quetzalcoatl return myth.

Others have taken this line further (often in sharp critique of Todorov): the myth was a Spanish invention, the product of Cortés’s manipulations—theatrical and literary—and Spanish control of post-conquest discourse.⁸¹ Of course, the full form of the myth could only arise in conjunction with the Nahua who contributed to the *Florentine Codex*, but they were educated under Sahagún as Christian priests, wrote decades after the events, and seem to voice a plausible Indigenous desire to lay blame for the conquest on a scapegoated leader. Clendinnen takes a subtle approach to the conquest narrative, poking holes in the rationality of Cortés’s actions, but still finding in him a master manipulator whose actions are central to our understanding of the events. On the question of whether Moctezuma considered Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl, she finds it a “splendidly implausible notion—save that so many have believed it.”⁸² It is, rather, a result of

⁸⁰ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 119.

⁸¹ Townsend, “No One Said it was Quetzalcoatl,” Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” Susan Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: the Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), Molly Bassett, “Meeting the Gods: Apotheoses and Exchanges of the Early Encounter,” *Material Religion* 8, no. 4 (2012), 416–39, Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 112–15, Claudia Jane Rogers, “‘The People from Heaven’?: Reading Indigenous Responses to Europeans during Moments of Early Encounter in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica, 1492–c.1585,” Dissertation, (University of Leeds, 2018), Gesa Mackenthun, *Metaphors of Dispossession: American Beginnings and the Translation of Empire, 1492–1637* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

⁸² Clendinnen adds, “if the ‘Quetzalcoatl returned’ story as presented in the *Florentine Codex* is a post-Conquest imposition, as is likely, and if indeed it does move away from traditional native ways of accounting for human action in the world, with Moctezuma’s conduct described not merely to

Cortés's own literary invention, reinforced by the need for an explanatory myth in the wake of Mexican defeat.

The skepticism is warranted, for it is partly what the Spaniards themselves claimed at the time. Cortés's letter and conscious attempts to manipulate native religious perceptions provide a structure onto which Indigenous myth could accumulate over decades. And the enthusiasm with which Europeans took up the story should give us pause. Although the most complete and evocative expression of the myth is found in a quasi-Indigenous account, it quickly filtered through European writing. An anonymous English play written in Latin c. 1627 imagines Moctezuma's court as the scene of the kind of intrigues typical of European courts on the early modern stage.⁸³ It opens with a discussion between courtiers about the "unknown race . . . from a distant part of the world":

TACLAXUS. The common folk . . . regard them as sons of thunder, while others regard them as children of heaven and a race belonging to the sky, imagining them to be either messengers of the gods or the gods themselves in human guise.

MEXUS. What's the reason for such an opinion, and what's the source of our citizens' foolish brain-sickness?

TACLAXUS. Blind, foolish brain-sickness though it may be, there is nevertheless some reason for this gullible mistake: the skill of these men and their ardent use of amazing weapons, completely unfamiliar in these regions is proof that they are

memorialize his shame but in order to explain the outcome of defeat, as I believe it does—then its fabrication points to a concern for the construction of a viable and satisfying public history for the conquered, an emollient myth, generated in part from within the European epistemological system to encompass the catastrophe of Mexican defeat." Clendinnen, 35–36. Gesa Mackenthun excludes the possibility that Moctezuma confused Cortés with Quetzalcoatl, since the earliest texts do not mention the claim: "the several pieces on Quetzalcoatl that the authors give may rather be read as a series of attempts of Mexican native intellectuals within postconquest society to come to terms with their recent past by integrating the figure of Quetzalcoatl into the providential framework that was superimposed on their own culture by their Franciscan education. They do not, however, pose genuine accounts of Mexican reality in 1520." Mackenthun, 129.

⁸³ *Montezuma sive Mexici Imperii Occasus*, trans. Dana F. Sutton, (The Philological Museum, University of California, Irvine, 2010, rev. 2012). Dana F. Sutton proposes that the play should be ascribed to the Jesuit playwright Joseph Simons (alias of Emmanuel Lobb).

superhuman, so that our silly commoners regard them as nothing less than gods.⁸⁴

To the extent that this Englishman creates a parallel between the politicking courtiers in Mexico and those at home, he displaces the foolish belief that the Spanish are gods onto the Stefanos and Trinculos of their world: those who stand in awe of the great, and who are in turn met with contempt. Yet he also marshals the Indian courtiers' voices to express such awe. The fictional Mexicans flatter any European readers by recognizing the invaders' superior military strength, painted as a terrible, Prospero-like power:

Who knows how to overcome the thunderbolts of Jove himself? Nature hurls her lightning blindly and with a random strike. But these men ply their fearful thunder with art, and wield their lightning with a most accurate hand. Once the call for battle has been sounded, you can immediately see their battle-line entirely engulfed in forked fires. Their men stand in their ranks, unmoved, amidst the great noise of the terrible roaring and the pitch-black smoke of their fire-belching tubes. They deal out flying death from a long way off, and lay everything low with a slaughter we have never seen before.⁸⁵

What is more, these representations perpetuate themselves not only in the cultural imagination, but also as colonial strategy. The London Company instructed the new venture at Jamestown, "Do not advertize the killing of any of your men that the Country people may know it . . . [lest] they Perceive they are but Common men . . . Do well also not to Let them See or know of Your Sick men."⁸⁶ Having been seized and brought before the chief Powhatan, John Smith attempted to amaze his captors with the wonders of the magnetic compass.⁸⁷ There need

⁸⁴ *Montezuma sive Mexici Imperii Occasus*, 1.1.

⁸⁵ *Montezuma sive Mexici Imperii Occasus*, 1.1.

⁸⁶ "Advice by the London Council for the intended Voyage to Virginia on what should be observed by those Captains and Company which are sent, Dated Between November 20th and December 19th, 1601" in *The Jamestown Voyages Under the First Charter 1601–1609*, vol. 1, ed. P. L. Barbour, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 49–54.

⁸⁷ John Smith, having been brought before the Powhatan "king," writes, "I presented him with a compasse diall, describing by my best meanes the use therof, whereat he so amazedly admired, as he suffered me to proceed in a discourse of the roundnes of the earth, the course of the sunne, moone, starres and plannets."

not be any real consideration of Indigenous religion *qua* religion or culture. The purpose may only be to manipulate what is manipulable, gain military advantage, and indulge in a fantasy of power that lends a certain aesthetic pleasure. To imagine oneself dealing out Jove's forked lightning may share in the impulse for metamorphosis that led, for instance, to the sixteenth-century revival of Ovidian gods in Italian painting, or the elevated estrangement of human love in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*.⁸⁸ Even if the basis for the myth is not a fabrication, it became a discursive stage on which self-consciously modern men performed, and continued the real performance with written ones. The scene comes uncomfortably close to the kind of literary creation characteristic of the Renaissance: Prospero as artist, where the work of art is violent conquest.

But Europeans' propensity to shape the narrative materials of these encounters is hardly the most important, or most illuminating, aspect of the story. Their artful performances, their attempts to impose meaningful form on chaotic events, may have found their way to us with relative clarity. But they were not the only attempts to construct meaning from the same tangled material. To imagine that Europeans exercised such power in their discursive inventions that their fictions not only overwrote the native perspective, but actually *became* the native perspective, would be (at least) a mistake. The ruse is even less plausible when we consider that neither Cortés nor Díaz del Castillo nor Sahagún ever attempted to peddle the full fiction

John Smith, "A True Relation," in *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631)*, ed. Philip L. Barbour, (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 47.

⁸⁸ See Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis & the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986). These examples suggest the imaginative possibilities spurred by the Renaissance encounter with paganism, but a similar impulse might also be found in Milton's war between the angels in *Paradise Lost*.

themselves.⁸⁹ And to claim, as one skeptic does, that the Aztecs responded to the technological differences of the Spaniards “with intelligence and savvy rather than wide-eyed talk of gods” is to create an unwarranted division between belief in the native cosmology and the capacity to act pragmatically.⁹⁰ It is true that the stories that reach us about the Spanish-Aztec encounter are largely post-conquest fabrications. (How could it be otherwise?)⁹¹ Embedded in them, however, are stories beyond the ones they tell: intimations of other ways of perceiving the world, vital information about each culture, the depth of myth and history within each, and the experience of their long mutual entanglement.

Heredia, the old soldier with a strange appearance whom Cortés sends to accompany the Indians as a warring *Teule*, or god, illustrates the way each culture became unknowingly enveloped in the other. Whether Cortés was simply lucky or had by that point learned something about Aztec religion, David Carrasco notes, Heredia was a fortunate choice beyond what Cortés

⁸⁹ Sahagún in fact writes from his own perspective about his attempts to disabuse the Indians of their idolatry of Quetzalcoatl, whom he identifies as a sorcerer possessed by demons. See Carrasco, “The Return of Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire,” 148–204.

⁹⁰ Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 660.

⁹¹ It matters, however, just how post- the post-conquest interpretation took form. There seems, to me, to be ample evidence that the Quetzalcoatl return myth was circulating at the time of the Spanish invasion, and that it drew on an important part of the pre-encounter Mexican cosmovision. See Carrasco, Ch. 5, “When Strangers Come to Town: The Return of Quetzalcoatl and Millennial Discourse,” in *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 205–40. For the Cortés-Quetzalcoatl myth as an Indigenous explanation for the fall of Tenochtitlan, see James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 16–21. Readings that attempt to separate out the authentic, factual narrative from the inauthentic cultural narrative in Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*, claiming the former aspects must be from closer to the event on the basis of style, tend to perpetuate a division between Western assumptions about historical truth and unreliable Indigenous mythologies. In any event, scholars of the past several decades have been more willing to see post-conquest accounts not as corrupted by European influence but as themselves significant attempts to create meaning from hybrid cultural situations. See, for example, Gonzalo Lamana, *How “Indians” Think: Colonial Indigenous Intellectuals and the Question of Critical Race Theory* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019).

could have grasped.⁹² His limp, his blind eye, his disfigured face all mark him as a vessel in which Mexican deities could take human form. The rain god Tlaloc, like Heredia, had a twisted face; the powerful priestly god Tezcatlipoca had one lame leg, and was known to pass into human bodies with monstrous features. In a world in which unusual or grotesque traits were signs of extraordinary contact with divine powers, and in which deities were known through details of their form and dress, the shared physical features may easily have been taken as signs that the Spaniard acted in an extra-human capacity.

Quetzalcoatl, too, is significant in Mexican culture before and after the fall of Tenochtitlan far beyond whatever instrumental use the Spaniards were able to make of the myth in their own narratives. In an exceptional account of the Mesoamerican cosmovision, Carrasco details the central—though destabilizing—position the god-king held in the Aztec conception of their empire.⁹³ He was above all a legitimating authority, appropriated as the mythic origin of Aztec rule. The Aztecs, a relatively recent upstart power, had with great symbolic and political effort grafted themselves onto the ancient line of the Toltecs, the first urban empire in Mexico and primordial model of civilization. From their origins as a provincial Chichimec people, they had adapted themselves to the cosmological rhythms of urban life by developing an intensely hierarchical social structure, marrying into existing noble lines, and establishing through the representational tools of culture a lineage with Topilzin Quetzalcoatl, the ancient Toltec king who had founded the capital city of Tollan. Moctezuma occupied an office of divine kingship

⁹² Carrasco, “Spaniards as Gods: The Return of Quetzalcoatl,” in Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. David Carrasco, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 466–73, 466–68.

⁹³ This history is elaborated in Carrasco, “The Return of Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire,” in *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 148–204.

invented in order to claim the legitimacy of the Toltecs through this sacred genealogy. But the claim depended on a contradiction at the center of the origin myth: Topilzin Quetzalcoatl himself, being disgraced, abdicated his rule and departed to the east with the promise to return to claim his kingdom from his successors. The Aztecs, who staked their claim on ruling in Quetzalcoatl's name, even as outsiders, had invited a destabilizing element into the mythic foundation of their power.

The reemergence of the Quetzalcoatl myth during and after the Spanish arrival is thus an expression of the stranger kingship tradition deeply rooted in Mexica society. Stranger-kingdoms, according to Marshall Sahlins, “are the dominant form of premodern state the world around, perhaps the original form.”⁹⁴ They typically express a model of social viability by joining an Indigenous population to foreign rulers, whose dynastic origin is a legendary, often celestial, prince from elsewhere. The Aztecs ascended to their supreme place in Mesoamerican society by marrying a line of exalted Toltec rulers to a Chichimec population. That is, their origin story goes, a roving, non-urban and hence uncivilized people from the north was given the gifts of civilization and urban life by Quetzalcoatl. The Aztecs themselves were an outside power arriving from the periphery of Tenochtitlan, but with the hybrid authority to rule it. Quetzalcoatl, one tradition tells, was himself a foreign prince whom the Toltecs brought from Cuextlan to install as the founder of Tollan.⁹⁵ The Taino whom Columbus saw point at the sky experienced

⁹⁴ Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, *On Kings* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2017), 5.

⁹⁵ See Sahlins, “The Stranger-Kingship of the Mexica,” in Sahlins and Graeber, *On Kings*, 223–48, and Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 182: “Moctezuma was known as Cemanahuac Tlatoani (“Ruler of the World”)! But this elevation of the supreme ruler should come to us as no surprise. It is part of a decision made decades earlier when the Aztecs, in constructing their urban society and seeking to base it on a sacred genealogy, established access to a figure who was clearly a god-king.”

the encounter as fully, with as great significance, even if that experience lies further beyond our apprehension.

The story of perceived divinity, in its various forms, has had a long life as a crucial moment in the encounter between an ascendant colonial Europe and the Indigenous other. In the 1990s, a controversy erupted between Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere over the historical-anthropological interpretations of such episodes.⁹⁶ The proximate cause was the apotheosis of Captain James Cook, the eighteenth-century Englishman who was supposed to be taken as an instantiation of the Hawaiian fertility god Lono and later killed by native Hawaiians as a result. The deeper issues were the ways in which westerners have tended to think about and represent other cultures, the entire program of accessing and representing cultural difference—especially from within the perspective of colonial dominance.

Without recapitulating the bitter accusations, the exchange went something like this: Sahlins interprets the Cook story as an expression of Hawaiian culture. Obeyesekere takes aim at Sahlins, and the broader western tendency to retell such stories, questioning the idea that the Hawaiians really did take Cook for a god. He argues that the Hawaiians were acting more out of the “practical rationality” common to people everywhere—not just westerners—than the cultural explanation of ascribed divinity allows. The myth is a western invention, a story in which (*a la* Todorov) Europeans see clearly the world they inhabit while natives are clouded by the fixed superstitions of their “culture.” Europeans emerge from these narratives as free and rational actors in their world, natives as trapped (tragically, to the sympathetic) in theirs. The reality is

⁹⁶ Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), Marshall Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

that natives act within live circumstances for instrumental reasons, just as westerners do. And anyway, European culture is governed as much by myths, like this one, as anyone else.⁹⁷

Sahlins responds: Hawaiians and Europeans do in fact experience the world differently, and, if we are to understand others as fully human, a recognition of their particular differences is enormously important. A porous border between the spiritual and human worlds, including human divinity, is a well-established feature of Hawaiian culture, and not an embarrassing one. People everywhere act according to “practical rationality,” improvisation, and empiricism, but those thoughts and actions are governed by “culture,” which is ordered by myth and yet is not at all fixed or inflexible. And anyway, to disregard the particular cultures of all non-western peoples by imputing to them, instead, practical “bourgeois rationality”—that most European measure of humanity—is to dissolve Indigenous reality in the universalist solution that is the Enlightenment myth of rationality. “Different cultures, different rationalities.”⁹⁸

In truth, the positions are not so far apart. Obeyesekere speculates that Cook was instead taken as a chief named Lono, but concedes that chiefs shared in divine essences. Sahlins’s sense of Hawaiian ritual and their *akua*—not the same as an English “god”—and ritual leaves plenty of

⁹⁷ He writes, of the western myth model underlying the white gods myth, “Implicit in both Prospero and Kurtz is a commonplace assumption of the savage mind that is given to prelogical or mystical thought and in turn is fundamentally opposed to the logical and rational ways of thinking of modern man. I do not object to mythic thought per se but to the assumption of a lack of rational reflection implicit in the premise of prelogical, mystic, or mythic thought.” On Todorov’s interpretation of the Spanish conquest of Mexico (which he finds to be a continuation of the myth model), he makes the perceptive point that “it is possible to show from Todorov’s own rendering of Spanish histories that the Aztecs were as capable of spontaneity and improvisation as the Spaniards were capable of being dupes of their improvisational understanding of Aztec culture and mentality.” Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 15, 17.

⁹⁸ Sahlins writes, “What guides my response is a concern to show that commonsense bourgeois realism, when taken as a historiographic conceit, is a kind of symbolic violence done to other times and other customs. I want to suggest that one cannot do good history, not even contemporary history, without regard for ideas, actions, and ontologies that are not and never were our own. Different cultures, different rationalities.” Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think*, 14.

room for recognizably-human agency. Obeyesekere's corrective amounts to a resounding call for skepticism about the discursive mediation of European narratives of others, and the corresponding need to afford as much individuated, rational agency to the natives as is typically given to the European characters in these encounters. Sahlins, in turn, offers a resounding call for skepticism about ascribing our own ways of thinking to others and thereby writing over their culturally constructed world with our "real" one. In terms that Carrasco uses to describe the Aztec experience of the encounter, the "social drama" of pragmatic encounter between humans is entwined with the "mythic drama," the particular cultural grammar that orders the events and gives them meaning.⁹⁹ As in Aztec Mexico, divine beings may take on human form. A stranger *akua* arriving during the Makahiki, the annual rebirth of nature, is thus well-explained by the culture—if that culture is taken seriously. One flips the script: the natives are rational, the Europeans myth-bound. The other flips it again: that idea of rationality is a European myth, for each culture creates its own rationality through its myths.

V.

The issues raised in the modern exchange have a special relation to the Renaissance, and may be read back into the older materials. It is not for nothing that Obeyesekere sees Cortés among the Aztecs as the prototypical instance of the myth model, or that he names the civilizing

⁹⁹ The concept of "social drama" comes from Victor Turner: "a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive, or agonistic type," which reveal the otherwise hidden structures by which a society is organized. Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957), 33. For the relationship between "social drama" and "mythic drama" in this episode see Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 191–2.

myth of Cook the “Prospero syndrome.”¹⁰⁰ And it is revealing, too, that Sahlins aligns Obeyesekere’s critique with Francis Bacon.¹⁰¹ Rational empiricism, Bacon thought, will destroy the idols of the mind, disperse the clouds of tradition and superstition, and leave behind only hard reality for the taking. Both correctives involve recognizing the role of myth in ordering all societies. For us, the Renaissance—including the European encounter with the New World—provides a great deal of the mythic drama according to which any given social drama plays out. And any true history of a particular encounter, of the broad European encounter with the New World, and of the thing we call the Renaissance, should be thought of as not, or not only, *what really happened*, but rather (to take Sahlins’s formulation) *what it is that happened*: the meaning of the events as construed by culture.¹⁰²

So, for example, Bacon’s revolutionary ideas about accessing the truth of nature through empiricism, reason, and the scientific arts are not an expression of the pure rationality that he claimed, but must be recognized as developing alongside the almost obsessive presence of the New World and its inhabitants in his thought:

Again, let a man only consider what a difference there is between the life of men in the most civilized province of Europe and in the wildest and most barbarous districts of New India, he will feel it be great enough to justify the saying that ‘man is a god to man’ not only in regard of aid and benefit, but also by a comparison of condition. And this difference comes not from soil, not from

¹⁰⁰ Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 11.

¹⁰¹ Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think*, 7.

¹⁰² Sahlins explains, in another book, “what actually happens in a given situation is always constituted by cultural significations that transcend the parameters of the happening itself: Bobby Thomson didn’t simply hit the ball over the left-field fence, he won the pennant. The better part of history is atemporal and cultural: not ‘what actually happened,’ but what it is that happened.” Sahlins and Graeber, *On Kings*, 17.

climate, not from race, but from the arts.¹⁰³

Bacon's conception of technological progress is expressed through a familiar way of thinking about New World difference: others are still beholden to the idols of the mind, i.e. culture, while Europeans are at least beginning to transcend such illusions. These ideas are generated according to a deep-seated cultural myth. That is, beginning in this period, the relatively stark Christian separation between body and spirit, material nature and divine supernature, is given secular form in the dichotomy of empirical reality and obfuscating culture—Bacon's project of demystification.¹⁰⁴ *What really happened* was that European societies developed, say, the magnetic compass while Indian societies had not; *what it is that happened*, for Europeans, was that their mastery over the material world had placed them at an advanced stage on a progressive scale of civilization. Cultural difference, and the naïve perception of European divinity, are the result.

The idea that cultures existed on a progressive scale was thus used to make sense of the European experience of cultural difference, though not always in ways so familiar to us. Their demystification involves another form of mystification. As the Lenape account of Hudson makes clear, what we might call religion could provide Indigenous people with ways of making intelligible the extreme strangeness of the Europeans' appearance and actions. And if the particularities of the Europeans' Christianity never quite allowed them to perceive Indians as gods, they nevertheless experienced the encounter as highly charged with supernatural forces.

¹⁰³ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, ed. John M. Robertson, (London: George Routledge and Sons, rpt. 1905), 300.

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of the conflicting accounts of spirit and matter between the English and Algonquians, see Chaplin, "Matter and Manitou," in *Subject Matter*, 280–320.

Their accounts reveal an obsession with the real demonic influences at work in New World society: the errors of native ways are brought into the world by Satan, their shamans (or “conjurers”) possessed by demons or illicitly meddling with demonic power. The credulous natives *had* been deceived into believing in visiting gods. The original trickster, however, was Satan. These perceptions at once derive from and reinforce their own cultural assumption that spatial and historical distance could be conflated. For nearly all early modern accounts of earliest human history depict the development of primitive religion as the result of demonic trickery, and this history was easily transposed onto the living religions of the New World. Johann Boemus’s groundbreaking ethnographic compendium *Omnium gentium mores* introduces his scientific study of various customs with a historical account of how Satan worked on primitive peoples, “launched into their hartes a blinde supersticion, and feare: he trained it whole to a wicked worship of many goddes and Goddesses.”¹⁰⁵ Thus the whole array of pagan religions around the world.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Johannes Boemus, *The fardle of facions conteining the aunciente maners, customes, and lawes, of the peoples inhabiting the two partes of the earth, called Affrike and Asia* (London: Ihon Kingstone and Henry Sutton, 1555), preface.

¹⁰⁶ At the same time, however, the same encounters with other religions helped to create the modern concept of religion as a more relative property of culture—not simply, as here, an opposition between true and false religion. See Guy Stroumsa, “The Scholarly Discovery of Religion in Early Modern Times,” in Jerry H. Bentley et al., eds. *The Cambridge World History* vol. 6, part 2, *The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 319: “In earlier times, religion had always remained a binary opposition between *vera* and *falsa religio*. Together with the devaluation of Christianity, both implicit and explicit, the discovery of so many and so different forms of religion permitted, paradoxically, the development of a single concept of religion. From then on, religion would be perceived, primarily, as a central aspect of any society, endowed with a different function in each one of them. Religion had become part of collective identity, and the study of religion would see, gradually, intellectual curiosity take over polemical animus.” See also Carina L. Johnson, “Idoltrous Cultures and the Practice of Religion,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 597–621, and Tomás Bartoletti, “Ethnophilology and Colonial Demonology: Towards a Global History of Early Modern Superstition,” *Global Intellectual History* (2020): 1–27.

The agonistic social drama that took place between the Indians and Europeans in the New World was everywhere suffused with mythic drama on all sides. (Again, how could it be otherwise?) As Cortés attempted to manipulate native religious perceptions on his way to Tenochtitlan, he zealously tore down their idols and replaced them with icons of the Virgin Mary. Soon after the fall of Tenochtitlan, Francisco Pizarro led a similar campaign against the great Inca Empire of Peru, in which Pizarro was tentatively received as the god Viracocha. As in other episodes, the Christian sense that the encounter constituted an epochal revelation of the true religion to an ignorant people shaped the events as much as any military stratagem. But the presence of a contrary perspective, its participation in the social drama, also actively shapes the European cultural myths in new ways. Cultures never exist in isolation.

At a moment of heightened tension in the initial exchange between the Inca ruler Atahualpa and the Spaniards, whom he at least provisionally interprets as deities, a coincidence of translation unites the two assertions of religious primacy. A Spanish priest presents and reads from a breviary, to which Atahualpa, who cannot hear the book speak to him as it seems to for the priest, replies:

“This speaks and says that you are son of the Sun? I am son of the Sun too,” and all his Indians answered . . . together “thus is, *Çapa Ynga*.” And the Inca turned to say very loudly that he also came from where the Sun was . . . and his people answered him once again: “thus is only lord.”¹⁰⁷

A scene that was intended to display humane kindness—like a mystery play dramatizing the bringing of Christian truth—instead enacts a competition similar to that imagined between

¹⁰⁷ Juan de Betanzos, qtd. in Gonzalo Lamana, “Beyond Exotization and Likeness: Alterity and the Production of Sense in a Colonial Encounter” in *Domination without Dominance: Inca-Spanish Encounters in Early Colonial Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 58.

Prospero and Setebos.¹⁰⁸ Atahualpa himself, and all Inca rulers, claimed divinity, and so his recognition that the opposed parties mirrored each other in some deep way creates a shock to which the European mythic drama must react.

Moreover, while Europeans mythologized the encounter as the self-evident display of their own cultural superiority, the native perspective was often, ironically, something close to the opposite. According to a quasi-Indigenous account, the Incas first came to tentatively associate the Spaniards with gods because of their strange customs and appearance, for “they ate gold and silver, they and their horses. . . . And they had no lord, they all looked like brothers in their clothing, way of talking and chatting, eating and dressing.”¹⁰⁹ From the position of an intensely hierarchical and ritualized Andean social world, it was the Spanish who appeared oddly cultureless. The opacity of the strangers’ culture generated a polarized response: should they be identified as gods or scoundrels? The prevailing question of identification for the Inca, Gonzalo Lamana writes, was “who or what are those that can thus break all social rules and taboos?”¹¹⁰ They had godly attributes, but they also do things the Viracocha do not. They need to carry water, they eat, they take the clothes and gold they desire. Some in Atahualpa’s camp interpret the mix of inscrutable signs to mean that the visitors must be “*quitas pumaranga*, that means people without a lord, loose and highwaymen.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ For the ways in which the narrative of Cajamarca puts on display the dilemmas posed by Atlantic religious encounters, see Gonzalo Lamana, “Of Books, Popes, and Huacas; or, the Dilemmas of Being Christian,” in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, ed. Margaret Rich Greer, Walter Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). See also Sabine MacCormack, “Gods, Demons, and Idols in the Andes,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 623–48.

¹⁰⁹ Betanzos, qtd. in Lamana, “Beyond Exotization and Likeness,” 34.

¹¹⁰ Lamana, “Beyond Exotization and Likeness,” 47.

¹¹¹ Lamana’s summary of the myth of the white gods question in this case seems, to me, convincing: “I will revise the identification of the Spanish as Viracochas, a controversial point that has been rejected as a

As we have seen, such reversals are endemic to cultural encounters in the New World. How were they to be assimilated? The challenges could remain unnoticed, and often were. Assumptions of European superiority predominated. But, because the myths of culture are always subject to revision and transformation, other ways of thinking could be made possible. Michel de Montaigne took uncommon note of the way the New World, in its particulars and in its abstract presence, unsettled many of his culture's most deeply entrenched assumptions. In his reflections on the stories, people, objects, and food that returned, he articulates a powerful cultural relativism—that is, the idea that different peoples are embedded within discrete cultural fields, and the only way to understand any given practice or belief is to view it from within its cultural matrix. This involves recognizing one's own position within a culture as well, and attempting to suspend judgment to the extent possible. The modern world could not do without the idea—it is the bedrock of anthropological investigation—but relativism also had to be invented as a cultural possibility, trained into the culture as a habit of thought.

“I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice,” Montaigne writes in “Of Cannibals,” “for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.”¹¹² Montaigne was not the only

Spanish invention imposed on the Indians (Pease 1991:148–55; 1995:137–60), a clear case of Western mythmaking in Obeyesekere's (1992) sense. In my opinion, the problem has been misframed; Viracocha is not relevant, per se. First, the exchanges between the Tallanes, Ciquinchara, and Atahualpa, and the subsequent research and guesswork, all fish elements out of a pool of godly attributes, which are used in a bricolage-like fashion to make sense of something out of the ordinary. Second, this sense making was politically informed. Finally, though the Viracocha label is a poor encapsulation of a much more fluid and complex situation, it is not an imposition, but rather the result of a colonial process of transculturation (Pratt 1992) involving Spanish actions as much as native ‘border thinking’ (Mignolo 2000).” Lamana, “Beyond Exotization and Likeness,” 43.

¹¹² Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 152. On early modern relativism, see Zachary Sayre

one to register the relativist position. Responding to Cortés’s description of Indians who place ornaments into their earlobes and lower lips, Peter Martyr writes, “I do not recall that I have ever seen anything more hideous. They, however, suppose that nothing under the orbit of the moon is more elegant . . . Urged on by taste, not persuaded by reason, the human species tends in this way to absurd notions; each province is ruled by its own habit of mind.”¹¹³ But no one expressed so profoundly the unsettling implications of this relativism as Montaigne. No one seems to have allowed the cultural construction of reality to pervade one’s experience so completely.¹¹⁴

It was not simply that different people have different tastes—that some people are able to abide a coach ride and others are not—but that the human diversity intimated by such small discrepancies is vast, the basic condition of humanity. Cultural differences have world-historical significance. In “Of Coaches,” Montaigne finds a powerful occasion for these ideas in the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru, civilizations “no less great, full, and well-limbed” than those of the Old World. He grasps the crux of the encounter by imagining the Indian perspective:

For as regards the men who subjugated them, take away the ruses and tricks that they used to deceive them, and the people’s natural astonishment at seeing the unexpected arrival of bearded men, different in language, religion, shape, and countenance, from a part of the world so remote, where they had never imagined there was any sort of human habitation, mounted on great unknown monsters, opposed to men who had never seen not only a horse, but any sort of animal trained to carry and endure a man or any other burden; men equipped with a hard

Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity: Relativism in the French Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

¹¹³ David A. Boruchoff, “Indians, Cannibals, and Barbarians: Hernán Cortés and Early Modern Cultural Relativism,” *Ethnohistory* 62, no. 1 (2015): 17–38.

¹¹⁴ See also Montaigne’s essay “Of Custom”: “Miracles arise from our ignorance of nature, not from the essence of nature. Habituation puts to sleep the eye of our judgment. Barbarians are no more marvelous to us than we are to them, nor for better cause; as everyone would admit if everyone knew how, after perusing these new examples, to reflect on his own and compare them sanely. Human reason is a tincture infused in about equal strength in all our opinions and ways, whatever their form: infinite in substance, infinite in diversity.” “Of Custom,” 80.

shiny skin and a sharp and glittering weapon, against men who, for the miracle of a mirror or a knife, would exchange a great treasure in gold and pearls, and who had neither the knowledge nor the material by which, even in full leisure, they could pierce our steel; add to this the lightning and thunder of our cannon and arquebuses—capable of disturbing Caesar himself, if he had been surprised by them with as little experience in his time—against people who were naked (except in some regions where the invention of some cotton fabric had reached them), without other arms at the most than bows, stones, sticks, and wooden bucklers; people taken by surprise, under color of friendship and good faith, by curiosity to see strange and unknown things: eliminate this disparity, I say, and you take from the conquerors the whole basis of so many victories.¹¹⁵

What is typically taken to be the advantage of European reason—the anchor that held even amid the occasional recognition of relative customs—is just one more habit of thought. In Montaigne’s rendering, it is a shockingly corrupt one. As the world undergoes Montaigne’s inversion, rationality becomes depravity and deceit, “ruses and tricks.” The Indians are like Montaigne himself, taken “by curiosity to see strange and unknown things,” and so he sees the Spanish as strange and unknown. One who has no experience of horses, metal armor, swords, guns, and cannons sees them as “great unknown monsters,” “a hard shiny skin and a sharp and glittering weapon,” “lightning and thunder,” hence Montaigne does too. The displacement of perspective, however, is more a displacement than total identification, for the weapons remain “our steel . . . our cannon and arquebuses.” Caesar, conqueror of the Gauls, exists “in his time,” within a bounded historical place. If he were to be brought in contact with another he may be imagined to experience the Indians’ sense of awe.

“I fear that our knowledge is weak in every direction; we do not see very far ahead or very far behind.” Even if it were all true, the totality of human knowledge from ages past is “less than nothing compared with what is unknown.”¹¹⁶ Montaigne’s extreme skepticism, borne of his

¹¹⁵ “Of Coaches,” 694.

¹¹⁶ “Of Coaches,” 692.

awareness of the dizzying scale of the world and its history, leads to an expression of relativism far beyond what most in his age could have imagined. He makes a concerted attempt to separate himself from the cultural presuppositions that, he recognizes, bind him. Thus he is taken in by the Aztec cosmos and the way it intermingles with history: “They judged, as we do, that the universe was near its end, and they took as a sign of this the desolation that we brought upon them.”¹¹⁷ Their long history of successive suns, each punctuated by destruction, is entertained without judgment. And he shows as much wonder at the material accomplishment of the Inca highway through the Andes, attentive to details from the name of the tree that lines the road (*molly*) to the foreign method of building with massive stones.¹¹⁸

Experience is at once irremediably cultural—that is, subject to the intangible influences of stories, conceptions, tastes, values—and material—the food one eats, the effects of weapons or disease on the body. Montaigne is in this essay keenly aware of how the two become bound up together. Even as he alights on cultural difference as an answer to the mystery of Spanish conquest, he underscores the barest material facts: the Indians lacked “the material by which, even in full leisure, they could pierce our steel.” Montaigne could not have understood fully the role of basic force in the conflict as we do now. The difference in weaponry and armor had less to do with the Spanish success (in Peru, some Spanish soldiers abandoned their steel armor for the light and effective Andean cloth armor)¹¹⁹ than the fact that the Spaniards made up only about one percent of the forces opposed to both the Aztecs and Inca. In the case of Mexico, the

¹¹⁷ “Of Coaches,” 698.

¹¹⁸ “Of Coaches,” 698.

¹¹⁹ Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 84.

conquest is better understood as a revolt of conquered Indian peoples against an overextended imperial power.¹²⁰

Yet in other ways Montaigne grasps the events better than we can imagine. How could the Spaniards, few in number and on foreign soil, outnumbered by orders of magnitude, prevail against the most powerful civilizations ever seen in the Americas? They managed to capture the king. Atahualpa, the divine *Sapa Inca*, and Moctezuma, the *Cemanahuac Tlatoani*, Ruler of the World, were supreme rulers whose lives were sacred—far more important than any other’s, or even the wealth of the empire. In Cortés’s description, neither his lords nor his people may look upon Moctezuma; “He dressed each day in four different garments and never dressed again in the same ones.”¹²¹ Díaz del Castillo recalls how “the Great Moctezuma got down from his litter, and those great Caciques supported him with their arms beneath a marvelously rich canopy of green-coloured feathers with much gold and silver embroidery . . . and many other Lords who walked before the Great Moctezuma, sweeping the ground where he would tread and spreading cloths on it, so that he should not tread on the earth.”¹²² Atahualpa, who declared himself “son of the Sun,” likewise occupied a position of human divinity, on full display as he met Pizzaro’s men with forty to sixty thousand of his own.¹²³ Once they had surprised, captured, and killed the two

¹²⁰ Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) provides a detailed account of the conquest, arguing that “Mexico was conquered not from abroad but from within,” and estimating the number of Indigenous allies at 200,000. Hassig, 182. See also Restall, *Seven Myths*, 44–8.

¹²¹ Hernán Cortés, “The Second Letter,” in *Letters from Mexico*, trans. and ed. Anthony Pagden, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971, rev. 1986, rpt. 2001), 112.

¹²² Díaz del Castillo, 158.

¹²³ Lamana, *Domination without Dominance*, 49.

supreme heads of state, the Spaniards inserted themselves into the existing structures of imperial power with relative ease.¹²⁴

Returning to the coaches with which his essay begins, Montaigne comes to an end with the image of Atahualpa on a seat “carried by men, and on their shoulders” during the pivotal ambush at Cajamarca:

The last king of Peru, the day that he was taken, was thus carried on shafts of gold, seated in a chair of gold, in the midst of his army. As many of these carriers as they killed to make him fall—for they wanted to take him alive—so many others vied to take the place of the dead ones, so that they never could bring him down, however great a slaughter they made of those people, until a horseman seized him around the body and pulled him to the ground.¹²⁵

This spectacular and unsettling scene captures something of the complexity and power of the cultural forces that convince the king’s subjects to readily take another’s place, holding him aloft in the midst of an attack, or to ransom his life with the empire’s gold. The image stands for Montaigne’s perennial amazement at the existence of rulers who exert power over a mass of subjects, and at the deep current of violence seemingly necessary to the creation of aesthetic and political awe. For the European fascination with moments of human-divine conflation in the New World is compelled not only by a belief in native credulity, but more profoundly by their recognition of this social-religious structure in alien garb, familiar enough from their own recurrent fantasies of political order. In this image of Atahualpa, we see, at a distance, an estranged version of the god-king myth recognizable to Europeans as the unstable core of their own cultural arrangements.

¹²⁴ Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 60–1.

¹²⁵ Montaigne, “Of Coaches,” 698–9.

VI.

In these theaters of the New World, Europeans saw themselves. That is not to say they saw only themselves, but rather something like the opposite: the extreme alterity of New World peoples was recorded and ravenously consumed in Europe because of its strangeness, and many of the most powerful instances of recognition found their source in what seemed most alien about these other people. In Bacon's hierarchical, progressive scale of civilization, in Boemus's rise from deluded paganism, in Montaigne's sense of the New World's artless "infancy," what they encountered, they thought, were forms of their own remote history.¹²⁶ It was their own political, religious, and cultural origins that played out in the New World. The shock of the reflection was all the more acute in an intensely theatrical society whose cultural myths of origin and identity were undergoing rounds of drastic upheaval. From the razed square of Tenochtitlan to Montaigne's theater of the mind to the playhouses of London, these newfound origins from ancient Rome and elsewhere, the new conceptions of historicity and the development of societies, were played out on all manner of stages.

As if to act out these new and ancient origins themselves, the Spanish, for a brief period in 1538, revived the Roman circus in the main square of Tenochtitlan. Among other festivities,

¹²⁶ David Quint argues that "Of Cannibals" (like "Of Coaches," discussed below) is embedded in an interrelated set of essays that compare war between the New World, ancient Rome, and France's wars of religion. This does not mean his understanding of cultural alterity is merely a reflection of his own concerns, however; on the contrary, "it may be precisely because Montaigne sees the cannibals through the terms of the crisis of his own society that he may come to understand something central about their culture." David Quint, "A Reconsideration of Montaigne's *Des cannibales*," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 187. On the confluence of historical origins and New World ethnography, see, for example, Anthony Welch, "Anthropology and Anthropophagy in the *Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 30, (2015): 167–92 and Mary Nyquist, "Contemporary Ancestors of de Bry, Hobbes, and Milton," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2008): 837–75.

they staged violent entertainments in a constructed forest and replica city of Rhodes. They filled the plaza with trees and a great variety of animals for what appears to be, in Díaz del Castillo's description, an entertainment set in the state of nature:

There were other very dense groves somewhat apart from the wood, and in each of them a party of savages with their knotted and twisted cudgels, and other savages with bows and arrows, and they set off for the chase, for at that moment [the animals] were let out of the enclosures, and they ran after them and through the wood and came out onto the great Plaza, and the killing of them led to a violent row between one lot of savages and the other, and it was worth seeing how they fought on foot with one another, and after they had fought for a time they returned to their grove.¹²⁷

Several layers of origin are here superimposed on the site. The conquistadors imagined themselves as conquering Romans, even as they saw the defeated Aztecs as Romans too.¹²⁸ The gladiatorial hunt and war between “savages” in the forest stages a primordial origin that is nevertheless bound up with European perceptions of Indian savagery and the recent memory of the war in Mexico. It was an attempt to resurrect the glory of Rome, whose exotic spectacles had impressed the conquistadors' imaginations, and forge through the performance a link between their strange, hybrid present and an originary past.

In “Of Coaches,” Montaigne is led to the New World empires by considering the extravagance of Roman gladiatorial spectacles.¹²⁹ In his rendering, the cornucopia of nature, the splendid trees and animals with which the amphitheater is filled, is joined to artful invention. The display confirms the emperor's generosity, his willingness and ability to bestow rare gifts on all

¹²⁷ Díaz del Castillo, 363–64.

¹²⁸ See David A. Lupher, *Romans in a New World: Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

¹²⁹ Montaigne's source for the rest of the material, Francisco López de Gómara's *Historia general de las Indias*, does not contain the above festivities. It seems likely that Montaigne himself provided the connection.

his subjects. The effect is one of aesthetic “amazement,” but the substance of the display is violence of the most brutal kind. If there is a hint of disgust at this alliance in Montaigne’s description—“The nets, too, which they put in front of the people to protect them from the violence of the loosened beasts, were woven of gold”—there is also the recognition that such powerful effects are fundamental to the emperor’s authority.¹³⁰

Montaigne’s final convergence of coaches and the sway of rulers in the distant New World is brought about by his earlier search for classical exemplars, particularly their habit of parading through Rome in chariots:

Mark Antony was the first who had himself drawn in Rome. . . . Heliogabalus did as much late, calling himself Cybele, the mother of the gods; and also by tigers, imitating the god Bacchus . . . and yet again four naked wenches, having himself, stark naked too, drawn by them in pomp.¹³¹

He suggests that such displays come from a feeling of insecurity, of kings “not sufficiently feeling what they are.” Mark Antony’s politic show of greatness shades into Heliogabalus’s wild-eyed spectacle. There are, to Montaigne, cracks in every foundation.

A fine symbol of imperial excess, the emperor Heliogabalus was infamous in the Renaissance for his claims to divinity. He took his name from the eastern sun-god Elagabalus, and commanded that he be worshiped in the senate as a god. Erasmus may have been thinking of someone like him when he writes of the foolishness of societies in which “divine honors [are] bestowed on little men, and even the most wicked tyrants [are] transformed into gods in public ceremonies. . . . This is the folly which spawns states; dominions are established by it, as are

¹³⁰ “Of Coaches,” 692.

¹³¹ “Of Coaches,” 687.

magistracies, civil religion, councils, and law courts.”¹³² Rome may well have been the height of civilization to the Renaissance, but in this respect it seemed closer to the earliest form of society. Polydore Vergil writes, in *On Discoveries*, “There is no doubt that humans, who in earlier times led an uncivilized and ungoverned life, began praising their first kings and giving them new honors until they made celestial beings of them. Prompted by the illusions of the demons that we have described, they even called them gods.”¹³³

To some, the Roman god-emperor was a cautionary tale, a divergent excess in an otherwise admirable society. To others, he was the thing itself, an embodiment of the very quality for which they were looking in the exemplary past. Francis Bacon writes that “amongst the heathen . . . to obtain to a veneration and adoration as a God” was the highest possible honor; “This unto the Christians is as the forbidden fruit.”¹³⁴ That quality—which promised more than examples of classical virtue—was brought to life on the English stage. Robert Greene associates Heliogabalus with Marlowe and the theatrical vogue he set off in an invective against those he sees as “daring God out of heaven with that Atheist *Tamburlan*, or blaspheming with the mad preest of the sonne.”¹³⁵

¹³² Erasmus [trans. Nelson], qtd. in Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31.

¹³³ Polydore Vergil, *On Discovery*, ed. Brian P. Copenhaver, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 69. See also Sabine MacCormack, “Limits of Understanding: Perceptions of Greco-Roman and Amerindian Paganism in Early Modern Europe,” in *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 79–105.

¹³⁴ Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, ed. John M. Robertson, (London: George Routledge and Sons, rpt. 1905), 64.

¹³⁵ Tom Rutter, “Marlowe, the ‘Mad Priest of the Sun’, and Heliogabalus,” *Early Theatre* 13, no. 1, (2010): 109–19.

Thus Tamburlaine enters his sequel play, like Montaigne's Heliogabalus, "*drawn in his chariot by the kings of TREBIZON and SORIA*," figuring himself as the Assyrian king Belus, who, according to Walter Raleigh, was "the first of all men that was ever honored by their subjects with the title of deity."¹³⁶ For Greene, Tamburlaine's grandiose style is identified with this aspiration to divinity and superhuman power. The claims and force of description that seem to expand the world of the stage, conjuring up grand visions of space and action, are part of this usurpation of godly characteristics.

Jove sometime masked in a shepherd's weed;
And by those steps that he hath scaled the heavens
May we become immortal like the gods.¹³⁷

The conception of kingship on display is bound up with its religious character, part hyperbole and analogy, part understanding that the structures underlying religious awe and the awe of kingship are the same.

In his choice of hero Marlowe follows the French humanist Louis Le Roy's celebratory account of the new age, which details its advances in learning and technology, its recovery of ancient knowledge and traditions, and, with Montaigne, considers the mysteries of culture, "the vicissitude in all human affairs, arms, letters, languages, arts, states, laws, and customs." Le Roy, however, attributes the origin of the Renaissance not to Italian thinkers or artists, nor even the recovery of Greek texts, but instead to "the reign of Tamerlane": "It seems that the marvels of this age should begin with the great and invincible Tamerlane, who frightened the world by the

¹³⁶ Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, in *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1829), 370. David H. Thurn draws this connection in "Sights of Power in 'Tamburlaine'" *English Literary Renaissance* 19, no. 1 (1989): 3–21, 3.

¹³⁷ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two*, in *The Complete Plays*, ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey, (New York: Penguin, 2003), 4.3.

terror of his name.”¹³⁸ We should thus see the Marlovian impulse to represent foreign, transgressive magnificence, and its rapt reception on the stage, as part of a Renaissance casting about for origins, experimenting with what it might mean to descend from other places and ways of thinking.

Shakespeare, too, is engaged in this sort of project. He turns to the Roman past throughout his career, and these points of contact may be thought of as a kind of repeated experimentation with cultural origins.¹³⁹ Where Marlowe directs all attention to the alien god-king himself, Shakespeare tends to approach the figure indirectly. *Julius Caesar* is not, as it might have been, a Tamburlanean play. Shakespeare is interested more in the bustle of reactions to the legendary would-be emperor than the man himself. It is Cassius who purveys the image of “immortal Caesar,” and he does it to deflate his stature.¹⁴⁰ When he first sounds Brutus’s mind, he juxtaposes the claims of divinity to the mortality of the flesh. During a swimming contest, Caesar once called out, “Help me, Cassius, or I sink!”

and this man
Is now become a god, and Cassius is
A wretched creature and must bend his body
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.
He had a fever when he was in Spain,

¹³⁸ Louis Le Roy, “The Excellence of This Age [*De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l’univers*, 1575],” in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, (New York: Penguin, 1953, revised ed. 1977), 107. Emily C. Bartels sees Marlowe’s Tamburlaine as waging “a campaign of difference,” showing that “in the game of empire, supremacy is not given but made—and made, ironically, out of others’ visions and voices.” Emily C. Bartels, “The Double Vision of the East: Imperialist Self-Construction in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, ‘Part One,’” *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992): 3.

¹³⁹ While I do not discuss them, *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline* also engage in a similar experimentation with origins and cultural difference by way of Roman antiquity. See Gilberta Golinelli, “In Dialogue with the New: Theorizations on the New World in *Titus Andronicus*,” in *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare’s Rome*, ed. Maria del Sapio Garbero, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 131–44, and Jean E. Feerick, “*Cymbeline* and Virginia’s British Climate,” in *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 78–112.

¹⁴⁰ *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.60.

And when the fit was on him, I did mark
How he did shake. 'Tis true, this god did shake.¹⁴¹

In keeping the play's focus on the human element of the conspirators, in making imperious Caesar a shadow cast over the play from outside its purview, and in killing him off in the at the beginning of the third act, Shakespeare has it both ways. Caesar is mortal, and easily dispatched; Caesar is a colossus, his name and image resounding throughout the play beyond the presence of the limited character.

As is often the case in Shakespeare, the human sphere is conspicuously part of larger cosmic narratives, though the significance usually lies ironically beyond the characters' confident grasp. Caesar claims his own astral identity, "constant as the northern star, / Of whose true-fixed and resting quality / There is no fellow in the firmament," just before his death. Cassius, who defies supernatural determinism, reads the portentous storm according to his own instrumental ends. To him, Caesar is but a man, and yet he sees in the tempest his own fears of a man endowed with immense power.

Now could I, Casca, name to thee a man
Most like this dreadful night,
That thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars
As doth the lion in the Capitol;
A man no mightier than thyself or me
In personal action, yet prodigious grown,
And fearful, as these strange eruptions are.¹⁴²

In the events that bring about monarchical-imperial rule in Rome, Shakespeare places the political machinations of power clearly in the foreground. Brutus demurs at the hit list necessary to manage the fallout; Antony does not. But lurking in the background are the numinous,

¹⁴¹ *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.111, 115–121.

¹⁴² *Julius Caesar*, 1.3.72–78.

charismatic forces that attend imperial rule and give the play its title. The storm (the first significant storm Shakespeare would employ on stage)¹⁴³ and its unnerving omens foretell a great historical rupture, but the nature of its connection to the human sphere is impossible to tell. If human activity is to be interpreted within a cosmic scheme, making mortals gods in thought is, in an important sense, to make them gods in fact.

In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony is the smooth operator who bends the myth of Caesar to his advantage; in *Antony and Cleopatra*, he has himself become the colossus. The lines spoken of Julius Caesar, “he doth bstride the narrow world / Like a Colossus,” are echoed in Cleopatra’s description of Antony, “His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm / Crested the world.”¹⁴⁴ From his beginnings as a “shrewd contriver,” Antony has accumulated the aura of myth, embodying the richness of imagination and human possibility that are built into idea of human divinity.¹⁴⁵ His downfall, others in the play tell us, comes from his doomed but life-giving love for the Egyptian stranger-queen, Cleopatra. The whirling array of scenes and the exaggerated, epic-tragic theatrical presence of the title characters suggest as much.

But we are also witness to Octavius cynically rationalizing his bare seizure of land and power. In the tumult of the play it is easy to overlook what actually causes the historical tectonics to shift: the ruthless Octavius simply takes Lepidus’s third part of the world on some post-facto pretext, threatening more. (In Shakespeare’s source, Lepidus betrays Octavius, but this detail is

¹⁴³ Gwilym Jones, “Storm and the Spectacular: *Julius Caesar*, *Shakespeare’s Storms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

¹⁴⁴ *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.135–36, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.81–2.

¹⁴⁵ *Julius Caesar*, 2.1.158.

left out in favor of the latter's scheming.)¹⁴⁶ In showing Octavius's move not long after Pompey contemplates a swift *coup d'état*, Shakespeare underscores how the imaginative life of powerful figures, the sense that they "bestride the narrow world," is built on a foundation of brute force. On the ship, Pompey need only take the simple step to cut the revelers' throats in exchange for all the world. He defers to propriety, but Octavius does not. Thus he becomes the new Caesar; Hercules, symbol of beyond-human strength and human divinity, leaves Antony and flies to him. The play ends with Caesar announcing the tragic funeral of Antony and Cleopatra, "And then to Rome," to ascend to the imperial throne.¹⁴⁷ Caesar's own funeral, it was well-known, was a prime example of "the custom of deifying emperors, such as it was among the Romans" as Polydore Vergil relates. They "found their model of imperial deification in the funeral of the dictator Caesar."¹⁴⁸

These plays are about one of the epochal turning points in history, and in a sense the axis on which they turn is the creation of the deified emperor. After all the conniving, performing, and bloodshed, the accumulation of myth through Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, and Caesar Augustus adds up to a multifaceted image of the awe-inspiring figure who is more than human. What does it mean for Renaissance Europeans to see themselves in these events? Shakespeare offers a compelling, if unstable, picture. He takes a story about the rise of a certain seminal god-king myth and, without denying that element, turns it into a very human story. He and Marlowe and others of their generation *do* achieve the effect of human divinity to the extent

¹⁴⁶ *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders, Arden Third Series, (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 3.6.33–5 note.

¹⁴⁷ *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.361.

¹⁴⁸ *On Discovery*, 435.

that such a thing is possible on the stage: the characters are larger than life, immortal in a certain grandiose way, in control of charismatic tricks that move the audience. Their divinity lives in the imaginative fullness they seem to engender, the sense that they embody—through the repetition of performance—the nobleness of life.

For Shakespeare, the effect depends on his constant cleaving to the humanity of these human gods. To achieve his particular grandness of character, Antony must be “brought drunken forth.”¹⁴⁹ On Pompey’s ship, as he and the other lords of the world drink themselves to foolishness, as their mortal vulnerability is revealed—for they might well get their throats cut at any moment—they engage a kind of ethnographic curiosity in the East. What is the Egyptian crocodile like? It is as tall as it is, as long as it is, of its own color.¹⁵⁰ That is, it is irreducible and particular, a wonder of the imagination definable only by its earthly, physical nature. The myth of human divinity becomes a focal point for the Renaissance because it allows for the complex blend of universal and particular experience that generated the anthropological account of humanity then taking form. Caught up in the churn of force and fortune, mortality, intoxication, wonder at the world’s strange forms, humans create gods in thought out of their irreducibly material life. The interpenetration of culture and force is at the origin of Shakespeare’s representations of human society, itself a part of the wider transformations of Renaissance thought.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.217–18.

¹⁵⁰ *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.7.42–50.

¹⁵¹ In a remarkable passage, Thomas Hobbes explains the “seed” of all religions in humanity’s propensity “to stand in awe of their own imaginations”: “And they that make little, or no enquiry into the naturall causes of things, yet from the feare that proceeds from the ignorance it selfe, of what it is that hath the power to do them much good or harm, are enclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves, severall kinds of Powers Invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations; and in time of distresse to invoke them; as also in the time of unexpected good successe, to give them thanks; making the creatures of their

VII.

Let us fall back to our coaches. Montaigne's heart-stopping scene of Atahualpa at Cajamarca puts on display the immense power of culture, its hold over every part of our experience and imagination. In the figure of the god-king held aloft it has the resonance of Julius Caesar or Mark Antony or Tamburlaine as they echo down the ages, for the scene evokes the cultural power of origin stories resurrected. But because Atahualpa and his people are *not* like the Europeans, because their forms of life appear so marvelously strange, the realization that every person is embedded within a fabric of culture may take hold. Montaigne's sense of the limits to human knowledge relative to the world's infinite variety leads to an extreme form of skepticism and, in turn, to the cultural relativism that has worked its way from this point into the basic assumptions of modernity. We experience the world as given form by culture, by the stories of origins and identity that produce meaning through repeated performance. This realization also entails understanding that this creating culture has been created by us. Created, but not created alone: Montaigne's Atahualpa plays the role of stranger king, injecting alterity into what is assumed to be a stable native (that is, European) culture. Culture is thus constructed, but it is constructed from hybrid materials, outside the control of any author. Like the myth of the white gods, it is, at its core, a mutual creation.

own fancy, their Gods. By which means it hath come to passe, that from the innumerable variety of Fancy, men have created in the world innumerable sorts of Gods. And this Feare of things invisible, is the naturall Seed of that, which every one in himself calleth Religion; and in them that worship, or feare that Power otherwise than they do, Superstition.

And this seed of Religion, having been observed by many; some of those that have observed it, have been enclined thereby to nourish, dresse, and forme it into Lawes; and to adde to it of their own invention, any opinion of the causes of future events, by which they thought they should best be able to govern others, and make unto themselves the greatest use of their Powers." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 75.

Prospero is a mirror image of Montaigne's Atahualpa, reflecting the blend of art, power, and marvelous strangeness that help shape the conception of culture as it emerged from the New World context. Shakespeare's version of the myth shares with Montaigne's depiction of Atahualpa the sense that cultural forces are at once immensely powerful, capable of enthralling whole societies, and incredibly fragile. Prospero was once, he tells us, "Duke of Milan and / A prince of power," but, "rapt in secret studies" that are now the basis for his god-like presence on the stage, he did not foresee his brother's betrayal.¹⁵² Atahualpa gathers behind him all the power that fictions of culture can muster: the splendor of divine kingship and ancient lineage, the undying devotion of masses of subjects. It is overturned by a swift, almost opportunistic act of kidnapping, a simple application of force that turns the tables of the conflict, so apparently lopsided, in an instant.

There is something absurd about this blend of fiction and force, cultural power and material fact. It is the same absurdity that attends the comedy of misreading present in the Lenape account of the *Manitou* Hudson, or Caliban's intoxicated worship of Stephano and his celestial liquor. It is also the tragic absurdity of the defeat of the Aztec and Inca, to Montaigne, or of Cleopatra's fear that "Some squeaking Cleopatra [shall] boy my greatness."¹⁵³ Indeed it is the basis for the myth of the white gods, in which the cosmic edifice created by one culture is found to be built on nothing but air. Montaigne ends "Of Cannibals," the companion essay to "Of Coaches," by staging another version of the myth of the white gods in reverse. He reports the ethnography of some Indigenous Tupinambá from Brazil, who describe what they see on their travels to France:

¹⁵² *The Tempest*, 1.2.54–55, 77,

¹⁵³ *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.219.

They said that in the first place they thought it very strange that so many grown men, bearded, strong, and armed, who were around the king (it is likely that they were talking about the Swiss of his guard) should submit to obey a child, and that one of them was not chosen to command instead. Second (they have a way in their language of speaking of men as halves of one another), they had noticed that there were among us men full gorged with all sorts of good things, and that their other halves were beggars at the doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these needy halves could endure such an injustice, and did not take the others by the throat, or set fire to their houses.¹⁵⁴

Here it is the whole European social and cultural system that is revealed to be built on an unstable foundation. It is not just the king who is a hair's breadth from destruction, but the entire pyramidal structure that enthralls the many to the few. If only the scales of culture would fall from their eyes.

Montaigne's essay is one of the few direct sources of material for *The Tempest*, along with William Strachey's *True reportory of the wracke*, the story of a shipwreck on an island in the Bermudas en route to the new English colony in Virginia. All three texts are attended by the specter of insurrection given special form by the New World.¹⁵⁵ From the first scene in the storm, Shakespeare follows Montaigne in stripping away the illusions set up around power within the social order. It continues as Caliban's elevation of Stefano is embedded within a series of potential usurpations by force. If it is never very likely that Stefano and Trinculo will succeed in Caliban's plan, as he tells them, to "yield [Prospero] thee asleep, / Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head," it is nevertheless important that this *is* all it would take.¹⁵⁶ Like the *cannibales*

¹⁵⁴ "Of Cannibals," 159.

¹⁵⁵ For the theme of insurrection between Strachey and *The Tempest*, see Greenblatt, "Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 129–64.

¹⁵⁶ *The Tempest*, 3.2.56–57.

of Montaigne's essay, echoed in Caliban's name, he articulates something simple and profound about the vagaries of human power. He adds, to illustrate the point,

thou mayst brain him,
Having first seized his books; or with a log
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,
Or cut his weasand with thy knife.¹⁵⁷

More plausibly, at least given the expectations of drama, there is also the momentary possibility that Sebastian will topple Alonso, as Antonio suggests, "whom I with this obedient steel, three inches of it, / Can lay to bed forever," as Antonio nearly did with Prospero years before.¹⁵⁸

Shakespeare's plays do not discount the power of culture to exert tremendous influence over multitudes, but neither can they ever do away with the possibility that the bottom might fall out at any moment.

As in his depiction of Roman god-kings and their politics, part of the quality of Shakespearean theater comes from this sense that any belief in a true order of things is revealed to be pathetically naïve in the face of the slightest pressures. Thus the former King Lear, in a crisis of authority brought on by another storm: "When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was every thing. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof."¹⁵⁹ Lear is mortal, subject to the same natural elements as Poor Tom; the god Caesar is subject to a fever; Prospero may get a nail knocked into his head. Built into the understanding of human power that emerges from many of Shakespeare's plays is the

¹⁵⁷ *The Tempest*, 3.2.82–85.

¹⁵⁸ *The Tempest*, 2.1.276–77.

¹⁵⁹ *King Lear*, 4.6.100–5.

idea that, however marvelous its expression, it is constituted, fundamentally, by force. Bare force, moreover, can puncture even the most elaborate and entrenched symbolic performance of culture. Such moments seem to allow for a clear-eyed view of cultural power: it is underpinned, always, by common human fragility and, ultimately, mortality.

If there is a special absurdity in the disjunction between cultural power and brute force, a different sort of absurdity emerges when both forms of power come back into alignment. Though not quite the same thing, the recurrence of Caliban's nail in the head, or the "three inches of steel," allows us to see Prospero's usurpation of Caliban as operating on the same level. Prospero's power is the power to "rack thee with old cramps, / Fill all thy bones with aches," to send "Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up," to cause Caliban to "be pinched / As thick as honeycomb."¹⁶⁰ Prospero's magic is expressed in acute physical pain. Its effects for us are the stuff of theatrical spectacle, but on the island it is the power to enforce hard labor, to confine Caliban to a rock, and to cause the bodily suffering on which the island's social arrangement depends. Why should we worship such power?

Shakespeare and Montaigne are alike in their recognition of the absurdity, which arises out of an uncommon sensitivity to the wolfish cruelties humans enact on one another. There is an undeniable aesthetic power to Cortés's cannons and horses, "lightning and thunder" and "great unknown monsters," the engines of awful gods. But the power comes from their use to tear flesh and break bones, to betray humane trust. Awe goes hand in hand with barbarism: the bloody gladiatorial spectacles put on in Rome and Mexico; the Indian "savages" forced to enact a primordial state of war; Tamburlaine's chariot drawn in pomp by conquered kings;

¹⁶⁰ *The Tempest*, 1.2.325–29.

Heliogabalus's drawn by women; the abuse meted out on Caliban and Othello and Shylock, flawed yet intensely human characters, out of the fever of racial hatred. Europeans' visceral repulsion at cannibalism is nothing compared to what they should feel at the actions of their countrymen. As Montaigne says, "treachery, disloyalty, cruelty, tyranny . . . are our ordinary vices."¹⁶¹

The Lenape's *manitou*, or *mantoac* to the Powhatans of Virginia, is the power that reached beyond the human realm. Its presence at the border between cultures during colonial encounters is at the heart of the white gods myth in all its forms. To the Algonquians in Thomas Hariot's *Brief and True Report*, who, he reports, "could not tel whether to think us gods or men," it is the visceral experience of disease, a form of power whose expression is visible but whose logic is not, that compels their interpretation of the strangers.¹⁶² Considering why they seem to attribute divine power to the English, Hariot writes, "there could at no time happen any strange sicknesse, losses, hurtes, or any other crosse unto them, but that they would impute to us the cause or meanes therof for offending or not pleasing us."¹⁶³ In the Lenape account Hudson was called the Mannitto because he was thought to have access to the extraordinary power that influenced both the visible and invisible worlds. Like the Inca's view of the Spanish, the problems to be

¹⁶¹ "Of Cannibals," 156.

¹⁶² Thomas Hariot, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia (1588)*, ed. Paul Royster, (Electronic Texts in American Studies: Libraries at University of Nebraska–Lincoln), 42. Hariot was a careful observer of the Indians' religion, recording "that there are many Gods which they call *Mantoac*, but of different sortes and degrees . . . First they say were made the waters, out of which by the gods was made all diversitie of creatures that are visible or invisible." For the Carolina Algonquians' interpretation of events through their concept of *Mantoac*, see Oberg, "Gods and Men." For this account as a fairly accurate account of Carolina Algonquian medical beliefs, see Kelly Wisecup, "Epidemic, Encounter, and Colonial Promotion in Virginia," in *Medical Encounters: Knowledge and Identity in Early American Literatures* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 37–65.

¹⁶³ Hariot, 40.

interpreted are about these visitors who do not do the things humans do. The strangers are correctly associated with the severe disease that sweeps through native villages while leaving the English untouched. They shoot “invisible bullets,” like their metal ones. Hence, possibly, they are “not mortall, but . . . men of an old generation many yeeres past then risen againe to immortalitie.”¹⁶⁴

The shock of the new in New World encounters is partly the realization that others are not bound by the usual limitations. Cannibalism may be accepted, social hierarchies may not be observed, invisible powers may be wielded in new ways. In coming into contact with rare and novel forms of life, the shocks ripple out into seemingly stable common experience. Sahlins writes, “In practice, divine kingship is the essence of sovereignty: it is the ability to act as if one were a god; to step outside the confines of the human, and return to rain favor, or destruction, with arbitrariness and impunity.”¹⁶⁵ As the violent physical punishment of rulers, as the numinous authority that is built up around such acts, the power that touches human experience everywhere seems both absolutely reducible to force and at the same time irreducible as a construction of culture, a knot that cannot be untied.

The Tempest represents the repeated shockwaves of cultural encounter as a kaleidoscopic turning of perspective. “You have / Been jostled from your senses,” Prospero tells his audience of lords near the end of the play, speaking also to us.¹⁶⁶ The initial tempest punctures the claims of royal authority, revealed to be powerless against nature and God, only for the field of view to widen and the sense of order to be punctured again. The storm becomes a work of art, and

¹⁶⁴ Hariot, 43, 42.

¹⁶⁵ Sahlins and Graeber, *On Kings*, 7.

¹⁶⁶ *The Tempest*, 5.1.157–58.

human. Prospero's potent art is in turn the illusory fabric that cloaks the basic structure of life on the island: his torment of Caliban by invisible spirits, the enforced labor his tricks get him.

The threat in this view of things is that everything may be subsumed under the rubric of force and domination. The perspectives turn again and again only to strip away everything but the common denominator. Prospero is Sycorax, a magical being exiled to the island by force; Prospero is Antonio, plotting to supplant his brother by an alliance with Naples; Prospero is Ariel, confined and suing for freedom; Prospero is Caliban, who first was his own king, now bent on revenge. Conversely, all the characters are in some sense Prospero too. What remains? As Gonzalo and the mariners resign themselves to their fates during the storm, Antonio gives voice to an ambiguous fealty to authority that registers at once its tenacity and its absurdity: "Let's all sink wi'th' King."¹⁶⁷

But the final victory of force is not the way Shakespeare goes. His characters retain their particularity of perspective and language, endlessly generative beyond the bare facts, even as what they generate is revealed to be illusory. Antony retains his rich imaginative life despite our knowledge that his stature rests on his once having been himself a bloodless Caesar. So too is Prospero endowed with the same fantastic presence that does not blot out his cruelties. Perhaps more surprisingly, Caliban is furnished with the same qualities. He is a creature of imagination and cruelty, sensitive to beauty and yet embroiled in a life governed by force. Shakespeare attempts to hold in tension art's powers of attraction and repulsion: charismatic attraction to the rich and strange, repulsion at the full horror latent in both culture and nature. He creates an

¹⁶⁷ *The Tempest*, 1.1.57.

uncommon capaciousness in his plays precisely by spinning out wonders of the mind only to dissolve them in a moment.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And—like the baseless fabric of this vision—
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.¹⁶⁸

To see the myth of the white gods as a trick is to miss the tangled position it was: something like the layered reality of the theater, where the performance of power is at once empty and effective. The sea and sand of the island, the Roman forum, the diverse forms we imagine on the stage melt away because they were air to begin with. The claim is not only about the fiction, however. It extends out from the revels to include the solid globe and all who inherit it. Others are humans or monsters or gods because of the same trick of apprehension, the same machinery of culture. The baseless fabric of our imaginations is what makes them real to experience. It is a shocking vision that opens up, if only for a moment, like the skeptical abyss brought about by Montaigne's New World reflections. There is no encompassing reality but the self-constituting play of perspectives, each partial, each relative to and created alongside others. Human life is misapprehension, misreading, and intoxicating fantasy all the way down.

“You do yet taste / Some subtleties o’th’isle, that will not let you / Believe things certain,” says Prospero.¹⁶⁹ The visions of the isle may make it especially clear, but this

¹⁶⁸ *The Tempest*, 4.1.148–58,

¹⁶⁹ *The Tempest*, 5.1.123–25.

uncertainty is a pervasive condition. Our perspectives are limited perspectives, governed by bodily fragility and the capacity for baseless imagination. Like Prospero, like Caliban, wonderful illusions spring from our confinement: the authorizing structures of human culture, the charismatic allure of kings, the attempt to make sense of and influence the strange powers that shape our lives. But kings, after all, are not actually so important. They are capricious, venal, at times munificent, all with a greater-than-usual amplitude. Their god-like life they are given comes from the imagination of others. The myth of the white gods remains interesting in part because of the ultimate impossibility of knowing what actually happened with any certainty. Instead we are brought to the receding point of Moctezuma's imaginings, the mysteries and particularities of a view of things not our own.

As Prospero finally steps out into the space between the island and the playhouse, what is it that we, the audience, see? He came to the island and Caliban as a powerful stranger king. What we have been watching is the story of his return, again as a stranger from another world. Prospero has drowned his books and abjured his magic; his dreams fulfilled, he promises that "every third thought shall be my grave."¹⁷⁰ Does he break character or not? Does he belong, in the epilogue, to the material human world of acting, the everyday exchanges of the playhouse, and common human mortality, or, his "charms . . . all o'erthrown," does he still retain the aura of fiction and myth in which we are asked to uncertainly believe?¹⁷¹ The return of the stranger god-king is figured as an appeal to us, for we, as lookers on an illusory performance, have some significant power. The all-too-human situation within culture is, in the end, the power to shape the dreamy material on which our worlds are made.

¹⁷⁰ *The Tempest*, 5.1.313.

¹⁷¹ *The Tempest*, Epilogue, 1.

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