

America, the Earthly Paradise: Early Depictions

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An understanding of America as a unique and exceptional place—both within and outside its borders—has long been studied and debated. In his seminal book, Seymour Lipset surveys the various parts of American exceptionalism, arguing that they have all been shaped by the values he defines as segments of the American Creed: “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire” (1996, 19). While it may be argued that the US was founded on this Creed, it was still necessary to invent and create a distinct American nation and culture. Within this complex process, (a) a commitment to values and principles was guaranteed through fundamental political documents and a basic political structure; (b) cultural homogenization was accomplished through cultural production and institutionalization as well as through vernacular language use, which was ensured by the development of print culture and public education; and (c) authentication was achieved through a series of invented traditions and historical, religious, and other types of meta-narratives, which also created national sentiments and drives and shaped the reality of an otherwise imagined community.

Zsolt Virágos calls attention to the significance of myths as they constitute a fundamental cultural realm in the US and are thus “essential to an understanding of its cultural values, collective self-image, value-impregnated beliefs, as well as those intellectual and emotional shaping factors which integrate culture” (1984, 573). He distinguishes between three types of myths, of which he explores one, the so-called “M-2 type public myths,” in one of his most recent essays (2011). He defines an M-2

type of myth as “a self-justifying intellectual construct that is capable of neutralizing epistemological contradictions, thus of claiming truth” (2011). He argues that this type of myth functions as a powerful tool “in the constitution of identities and underlying ideologies” (2011). Virágos also lists a number of M-2 type myths that have characterized American cultural constructions in various waves and forms, including the myth of paradise. It is the manifestations of this myth in the period of discovery and exploration that the present paper investigates through a selection of examples.

In a study of the various ways in which America has been imagined and described in literary works of art, Peter Conrad states: “Before America could be discovered, it had to be imagined” (1980, 3). He argues that “Columbus knew what he hoped to find before he left Europe. Geographically, America was imagined in advance of its discovery as an arboreal paradise, Europe’s dream of verdurous luxury” (Conrad 1980, 3). The myth of paradise as it appears in the North American context derives from the sacred narrative of Christianity: it is a “universal myth” (Virágos 2011) that has been transformed to appear in particular forms and meanings in the service of different ideologies and power structures in various historical periods.

The earliest depictions of the newly discovered land portrayed America as Paradise on Earth, the way Eden was captured in the European imagination in the 15th and 16th centuries. Forms of representation at the time, argues Myers, echoed the Western convention of epistemological understanding and knowledge production of the age between the 9th and 17th centuries: “the recognition of resemblance” (1993, 61) or, as Michel Foucault describes it, “the sovereignty of the like” (2002, 48). Myers defines this epistemological condition as one in which “consciousness was the consciousness of resemblance, and growth in knowledge was experienced as the recognition of hitherto unrecognized resemblances” (Myers 1993, 61). Therefore, early descriptions of the New World as Paradise reflected the way in which this heavenly place was captured in the contemporary Western imagination: a beautiful, harmonious Virgilian site with a superb resemblance to places familiar to the describer.

The depiction of America as Paradise in Christopher Columbus’ “Letter to King Ferdinand of Spain” (1493) demonstrates these points quite well. He characterizes the new land in superlative terms, such as “marvelous,” “beyond comparison,” “most beautiful,” “of a thousand kinds,” “a wonder to behold,” “lovely,” “rich,” “cannot be believed to

exist,” etc. His letter paints a picture of a land of splendor, natural variety, unlimited wealth and complete harmony. Columbus describes the inhabitants of this Eden-like place in a similar vein, as people as yet unspoiled, who “believe that power and good are in the heavens” and possess “a very acute intelligence” and thus are able to “navigate all those seas,” being “amazing” observers and describers of the world around them.

Conveying an Eden-like state of natural existence, the letter is often sprinkled with comparisons to Christendom and Spain and thus illustrates that the fashion within which the image of the New World was constructed was the mental framework of resemblance. The description also reflects classical and biblical conventions of characterizing a pleasant place, or as Myers identifies it, a *locus amoenus* (1993, 59), which was depicted through pastoral, gentle Arcadian landscape scenes by artists such as Claude Lorrain.

Columbus’ letter was extremely significant as it offered the first report of the New World that also constructed a distinct identity for the newly discovered place from a European perspective. This identity reflected both the way America had been imagined before it was discovered and the particular ways in which a recognition of resemblance shaped practices of knowledge production. However, the text also allows for mapping certain ideological assumptions and positionings, based on which the colonial appropriation of the place could be justified. The name “Española” given to the new land, for example, is not only meaningful in terms of formalizing the identity of the place; it also signifies that it is under Spanish control.

The mythical description, for example, also lists various possibilities and offers projections for the future framed as realistic prospects for a successful colonizing effort. The following section illustrates the potential future imagined by Columbus for the New Land, ultimately also retrospectively justifying the expenses of Columbus’ trip and subsequent explorations as a worthwhile investment that would fulfill and validate Spanish imperial ambitions.

Española is a marvel. The sierras and the mountains, the plains, the champaigns, are so lovely and so rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of every kind, for building towns and villages. The harbours of the sea here are such as cannot be believed to exist unless they have been seen, and so with the rivers, many and great, and of good water, the majority of which contain gold. (Columbus, 1493) While Columbus describes the place as filled with potential for the development

of a booming civilization, a prosperous colony of the Spanish empire, he also hints at the possibility of quick wealth by mentioning gold as being readily available in abundance.

Sixteenth-century visual depictions of the New World and its inhabitants also reflect the mental framework of the recognition of resemblance. This is especially well-illustrated in the images of the Flemish engraver Theodor de Bry. While he published a series of books on America by different authors, his very first undertaking was the publication of Thomas Harriot's description of the New World entitled *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* in 1590. Harriot was an astronomer and a mathematician who had traveled to Roanoke Island and the coastline of North Carolina as part of Sir Ralph Lane's expedition in 1585, along with John White, an English painter, who painted watercolors during the trip. These watercolors, however, became widely known as a result of Bry's copper reproductions when he published them as illustrations to Harriot's volume.

White was commissioned to portray the flora and fauna of the areas visited during the expedition as well as to capture scenes of the life of the Natives they encountered. Some of his paintings are aerial views of specific sites, such as the "Indian Village of Secoton." White's image is the depiction of a simple village, with a main path or road cutting the settlement down the middle, with scattered houses along it. It shows three cultivated areas used for agricultural production on the right side of the road with a forest located on the left. A large clearing observable at the lower end is the site of prayer, where some of the natives are performing a ritual. In the middle of the path, a wide mat is placed on the ground, replete with plates and bowls full of food: this is the spot for village meals. Some people are seen there, either bringing food or eating, while others further down the road are engaged in other activities, such as setting off for the hunt armed with bows.

If we compare this image with Bry's illustration, which was based on this painting and published five years later, we can spot a series of modifications. While the basic structure and outline of the image remains unchanged, Bry shows a village with land that is more prosperous, more regulated, and more in line with the mental image of cultivated, orderly, carefully tended and thriving farmland than with White's. The corn and other products are bigger, healthier and fuller, and he shows a wider range of other plants growing as well. On the other side of the road, the forest is represented as rich in foliage: one can see many more trees and shrubs, of

various kinds, sizes and textures. It is an idealized pastoral scene, with clearly outlined structural units and paths, a number of huts added to the woodland, and more people integrated into the scene.

Another area of difference regards the portrayal of the indigenous people. In White's paintings, Natives appear as people of darker complexion, with brownish skin and straight black hair, often cut short or tied up in a twisted ponytail. Usually White focused on the portrait and thus painted no setting or environment; he focused only on the figures. His manner of representation, argues Sloan (2008), reflected contemporary artistic conventions of staging people being painted. As a result, she concludes, White's paintings, despite their shortcomings and imperfections, provided the "theater of the New World" (2008) for Englishmen in Elizabethan England.

These images, however, were popularized by Bry's copper engravings, which were published in various editions in German and Latin as well, making him one of the most powerful publishers all over Europe. Changes Bry introduced in his reproductions are probably most apparent in his depictions of female figures. White's "Indian woman of Secoton" represents a masculine, dark-skinned woman with her black hair tied up and her face and upper arm adorned with body tattoos. She is wearing a headband, a bead necklace, and an apron in front.

Bry's corrective intervention into White's picture resulted in the Native woman appearing rather in the fashion of the Italian Renaissance: Bry created a double portrait so that she could be seen from the front and the back. She is like a milky white-skinned amazon, with longer, wavy blond hair hanging down at the back, full-figured with curvy bodylines. Her face is Europeanized, although Bry retains the body tattoos as a sign of the exotic. Other images illustrating indigenous women portrayed like Botticelli's Venus include "How they till the soul and plough" and "How they treat their sick".

Another obvious difference in the individual portraits is that while White only focuses on the human body, Bry always places these figures in the local landscape as he imagined it. The Indian woman is painted on the bank of a river, with other figures in the background, fishing and canoeing in the water. He envisioned gently sloping mountains on the other side of the river, covered with thick forests, while a man hunting for deer is seen in the meadow on the other bank. Bry integrated the portrait into a daily scene as if offering an anthropological depiction of the people along with their lifestyle and common daily activities.

These early depictions of the New World can be understood as representations of the land as Paradise within Western epistemological conditions and artistic practices. They served a number of purposes. Tucker finds that these illustrations were significant assets in drumming up “support for a colony among British investors” (2008), something that White himself also became engaged in as he served as the second governor of Roanoke Island. Tucker regards White’s images “as a kind of pictorial menu” to lure settlers to a land of abundance. In this sense, these images may be considered as part of a greater propaganda (Zogry 2011, 12), a literature aimed at advertising the colonies among both potential settlers and investors. Sloan considers these “highly ramified visual images” that lent the project of colonization and settlement a particular national flavor (2008; cf. Zogry 2011, 12). Mignily finds that visual depictions of Native scenes and peoples introduced the “imperial gaze and rules” (2011, 176) to the European mindset in relation to the New World, contributing to the “colonial matrix of power, a complex structure of control and management, that emerged in the 16th century” (2011, 176). Indeed, Bry’s illustrations were also framed by contemporary artistic conventions and personal aesthetic as well as his desire for commercial success (Mignily 2011, 176).

These depictions that promoted the myth of America as Paradise during the first century following its discovery were thus produced to target a European audience. It was therefore constructed in accordance with the imagination of the age, defined by the consciousness of resemblance and determined by the ideological underpinning of religious beliefs and associated political ideologies and national drives with undercurrents of imperialistic desires for colonization.

Virágos argues that the American myth of Paradise functioned in defining America in terms of “patterns of dichotomization” (2011) between the Old World of Europe and the New World, America. In the early period of explorations, however, this dichotomy was not rooted in understanding differences in terms of oppositions. The depictions explored in this paper imply that these differences were presented with regard to similarities. This manner of consciousness and resultant forms of representation, then, capture the ways in which the new land can be regarded as a unique extension of the European countries involved in the explorations. This mode of representation, therefore, also naturalized a particular power’s claim to the land they were discovering and provided a concealed ideological underpinning and context for their colonization.

Practices and narratives about “civilizing” Natives and “cultivating” the land as of the early colonial period may be interpreted as a natural continuation of this understanding of the new land, as these in fact represented efforts to remake the colonized lands and people not only in the likeness of the colonizing country, but also into something that would be to the colonizer’s liking, two sides of an overall project of appropriation and colonization.

Emphasizing similarity in difference was also an essential strategy in enhancing the process of colonization. A degree of likeness in the newly discovered land was necessary to lure possible settlers to the New World and to convince investors to support the expansionist undertaking. At the same time, the myth of paradise was meaningless for the Native population on the American land. It was imported there later, transplanted gradually through various waves of European colonizers, such as the Plymouth Puritans.

In the course of this process, the meaning and use value of the myth had been transformed, emerging to mark a unique, specifically American condition and identity, constituting America as different from the mother country and continent. This took a firm ground in the mainstream American consciousness during the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries, as part of the invention and constitution of a distinct nation and culture that marked the newly created political entity: the United States. For the Europeans of the late 15th and 16th centuries, however, the myth of America as Paradise was presented “as recorded memory” (Virágos 2011) of past travels that “concealed future-oriented political ideology” (Virágos 2011) that aided in initiating and justifying upcoming colonizing efforts.

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