

Theodor De Bry's Voyages to the New and Old Worlds

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Illustrated by more than six hundred plates and comprising twenty-seven volumes published over a span of nearly half a century by Theodor de Bry and his two sons, the *Collectiones peregrinatorum in Indiam orientalem et Indiam occidentalem* (1590–1634) is a collection of European travels to the rest of the world that has offered a goldmine to scholars seeking visual material for the study of Europe's attitudes toward foreign others. Only quite recently, however, has any study been devoted to the compilations' complicated history as a book in and of itself. Michiel van Groesen's 2008 volume, *The Representations of the Overseas World in the De Bry Collection of Voyages, 1590–1634*, is the first in English to undertake a discussion of the entire collection, focusing not only on the better-known representations of travel to the Americas, but also on the voyages to the worlds of Africa, India, and the Far East.¹ Usually De Bry's work has been used to illustrate various specific points in individual scholar's arguments about European understandings of the Native American other. In 1981, for example, Bernadette Bucher wrote a provocative structuralist argument about gender and cannibalism, *Icon and Conquest: A Structural Analysis of the Illustrations of de Bry's Great Voyages*.² One thinks of a number of studies which appeared around the quincentennial of Columbus's "discovery" of America in 1992, such as Anthony Pagden's *The Fall of Natural Man* (1982) or Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* (1991), both of which feature plates from De Bry's *America* series for their covers. In editing this volume, I may well be making up for my own borrowing of De Bry plates for an essay on Edmund Spenser's understanding of New World slavery.³

Unlike such appropriations of specific plates from the De Bry collection, this special-topic issue of *JMEMS* explores two fundamental questions about the impact of the entire collection, which was divided into a series on voyages to the West, commonly referred to as *America* or *India Occidentalis*, and a series on voyages to the East commonly referred to as *India Orientalis*.⁴

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First, how might the “grands” voyages to the West have influenced European perceptions of the “petits” voyages to the East (as the two series were described in the eighteenth century)? Did the unlettered savagery depicted in accounts of travels to the “West” Indies have anything to do with European perceptions of the “East” Indies? Did Columbus’s mistake continue to be formative, and can an answer to the question of the relations between European Orientalist attitudes toward the New and Old Worlds be traced in the collection taken as a whole? Secondly, what sort of impact did the visualizations for which the collection was so famous have on other texts of the period, specifically on how racial difference was registered in terms of skin color, clothing, and writing itself?

Bucher’s title, focusing on the “grands” voyages, suggests that the difference between the eastern and western projects was one of bigness and smallness. As van Groesen points out, however, the differentiation merely refers to the size of the paper used to print the two sets: the smaller page size of the “petits” voyages series was based on a decision to increase profits by reducing costs. Thus, rather than a judgment about the relative size or importance of sea travel to the unknown West and the already-known East, the French title thus merely registers the fact that the collection was organized, first of all, to be a profitable venture in book publishing.

As the first set, *Occidentalis*, was often referred to as *America*, it thus was correcting Columbus’s mistake about “India,” but perhaps only offering another hemispherically prejudiced differentiation later embodied in the French terms “grands” and “petits.” It seems fitting to the modern world that the “bigger” voyages were to America, thus privileging discovery and the European project of exploration and plantation over mere visits to Africa and Asia.

While the first volume of *America* was published in four separate languages, English, French, German, and Latin, all the rest of the volumes came out only in German and Latin. Van Groesen argues that the two versions were aimed at two specific readerships—a mostly Catholic Latin-reading public and a Protestant German-reading one. De Bry’s title was *Collectiones peregrinatorum in Indiam orientalem et Indiam occidentalem*, so the coordinates were geographical rather than evaluative, with of course a crucial repeat of Columbus’s mistake and an insistence that both sets of voyages were, somehow, to India. This evaluative geographical perspective is summed up in the core work done by the title, which collapses primitive West and anciently civilized East into one—making both “primitive” compared to Europe. So even though the volumes in the series covered travels

to different places on the globe, the official title of the collection indicated that the voyages were somehow to the same site of exotic knowledge that was somehow primitive in relation to Europe. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said traces the epistemological collapse of the East into a singular site studied by Orientalists of myriad different academic specialties; Orientalism is thus at heart the means by which Western scientific knowledge makes the East into an object of study where the indigenous people living there are themselves incapable of proper self-scrutiny or analysis.⁵ Said locates the origins of modern imperialist “orientalism” centuries later in European history. Yet study of the entire collection of the De Bry voyages reminds us that the bifurcation of the world into the “East” and “West” began much earlier, and that, moreover, the terms originally distinguished Asia not from Europe itself as the “Occident,” but from America, another newly discovered object, laid bare for the readerly scrutiny of European eyes. The East, like the West, becomes incapable of self-articulation or literate self-representation, even though, of course, writing had begun a millennia before in China and India. The sequence of volumes illuminated by De Bry’s spectacular illustrations were much like Drake’s voyage, which reached the Orient only *after* the voyages had transgressed the lands of the unlettered “West.” In such a context, the ancient and lettered civilizations of the Orient lose their venerable status, especially the importance of the Islamic world for the transfer of Greek culture to Europe. Van Groesen’s comparative investigation demonstrates that the De Brys facilitated this collapse of the East into the West, when they gave African chiefs Amerindian feathered skirts; they thus mark the unlettered African and American peoples. When, however, they give subjects of the Mughal Empire distinctive Virginian three-feathered headgear, they begin to misrepresent a highly literate and silken-clothed civilization as if it were somehow “savage.” This is the very subtle beginning of Orientalism. They also offered versions of Eastern cannibalism to match that of the West.⁶ In such a way the violent practices of the “primitive” Westerners were used to render similarly suspect the ancient and lettered civilizations of the East. There were four continents on the Mercator and Ortelius maps: Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. De Bry locates himself in “Europe” privileging that corner of the globe at the “center”—from which the published voyages set out not in opposite directions, but in the manner of Drake’s, first toward the West (the first three volumes deal with English, French, and Italian travels to Virginia, Florida, and Brazil), reaching the East only in the much later publications of the seventeenth-century volumes. Europe was at that time neither East nor West, but the unmarked center.

Both the doubleness of the voyages to different “Indies” in the De Bry series and also the dual publication of the volumes in Latin and German suggest that, far from composing the volumes as a whole as a narrow polemical attack on Spanish imperial plunder in the New World, the De Brys were especially interested in selling as many books as possible. Under van Groesen’s comparative scrutiny, indeed, the plates and textual details take on a much more rigorously Protestant view of irreligion and idolatry in the German translation than they do in the Latin edition, suggesting that the De Brys pursued a more broadly profit-driven rather than ideological purpose. They adjusted their emphases for their different readerships.

The fact that the whole collection begins with the voyage to Raleigh’s “lost” colony in Virginia on the North American mainland is something of an accident of bookmaking. Van Groesen insists that “the making of the first volume is not representative of the making of the collection as a whole.” Because it was the first voyage to be printed, but one of the last to be undertaken in actual chronological sequence, the Virginia expedition was strangely privileged by the first volume’s account of the utterly abortive first English project. Like the later differentiation between the collection’s “large” and “small” voyages, this fact owes something to printerly accident. Unlike the vast majority of printers of earlier travel narratives, the De Brys were not humanists or themselves explorers; they were goldsmiths and engravers turned booksellers. They happened to be in London at the right time; Sir Philip Sidney had been killed in battle against the Spanish in the Lowlands, and the De Brys were asked to make one of the engravings to commemorate Sidney’s spectacular funeral procession. And as the preface to the first volume of *America* makes clear, it was Richard Hakluyt who was primarily behind the idea for this volume; he gave De Bry the watercolors made by John White of the Virginia inhabitants that served as De Bry’s models for his copperplates. (Hakluyt may also have introduced De Bry to Jacques Le Moyne, whose drawings served as the basis for the plates De Bry made for the voyage to Florida, which became the subject of volume 2 of *America*.)⁷ The original plan had been to dedicate the first volume to Sir Walter Raleigh, but when the De Brys decided against it, Hakluyt and his friends withdrew from the publishing project entirely. Perhaps in response to this withdrawal, van Groesen suggests, the remaining volumes appeared only for a German- and broadly Latin-reading Continental audience. The importance of the first volume in any series tends to mark it entirely, yet anglophone readers were, in fact, quite neglected in all the subsequent volumes, as only the first one appeared in English.

Another striking difference between the plates for the first and subsequent volumes of *America*, of course, is the lack of representations of Europeans in the first volume of this series, the reader's gaze being entirely focused on nearly nude Native American bodies. An engraving of naked Adam and Eve famously provides the frontispiece to volume 1, suggesting the importance of the narrative of the biblical Fall for understanding the indigenous people's nudity. While the image offers the possibility that nakedness may be equated with innocence, it simultaneously locates the lack of clothing within a familiar discourse of sin. Often in their pictorializations, the De Brys altered the original drawings by other artists upon which their engravings were based, stripping the originally clothed natives down to a complete nudity in order to deny them their proper level of civilization.⁸

While the illustrations of later volumes of *America* persistently depict Europeans in (often violent) contact with indigenous peoples, the sole figuration of a clothed European in the first volume of the series is the doll held in the hand of a young Pomeiooc girl running toward her mother (see fig. 1). As Karen Robertson has brilliantly pointed out, this picture of a dressed doll speaks to the two framing images for De Bry's representations of the Virginia Algonquins in the first volume, the opening frontispiece of Eden and the closing images of ancient Britons.⁹ Robertson argues that such a framework allows De Bry to make Virginia into an untouched paradise, ripe for conversion. As such, this volume implicitly contrasts the brutality of the Spanish armed conquest, to which subsequent volumes of *America* will give view. From the presentation of the first volume of *America*, the natives look as if there will be time for them to "develop" from their nakedness, just as the contextualizing images of tattooed Picts and early Britons reveal the gradual achievement of civility on the part of British islanders. John White's watercolors are the source for the images of the Algonquins; the frontispiece is by a very different hand, while the images of the Picts are from a French artist (Le Moyne) who also made the original images for the second De Bry volume on Florida. By adding the frontispiece and Le Moyne's Picts to White's pictures, as Robertson argues, the image of the young, virtually naked Pomeiooc girl suggests that she might be expected to mature without complication into an adult European consciousness, fully clothed. Robertson rightly calls this detail "enigmatic" — insinuating as it does that the Algonquians should rely upon the nonconquering peacefulness of the English explorers who, as the description of the image in the text makes clear, gave her the doll. The detail also suggests the lasting importance of dress as a marker differentiating otherness throughout the series and that



Figure 1
Native American girl with European doll. Theodor De Bry, Admiranda Narratio Fida tamen, de Commodis et Incolarum Ritibus Virginiae, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main, 1608), sig. A6r, plate 8. Courtesy Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

nakedness, like the lack of writing, continues to be a compelling signal of the fundamentally uncivilized status of non-Europeans.

It is thus not surprising that, in the first essay in this collection, Shankar Raman should find an important kind of “writing” on the bare back of a native Algonquian chief illustrated in *America*, which he juxtaposes to a nonrepresented “scene” of writing from a volume in the *Orientalis* series based on the travel account of the Dutchman Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, a work important for introducing Europeans to Asian culture. In Linschoten’s discussion of Chinese writing, Raman points out that the De Brys specifically chose *not* to give visual representation to a scene of Chinese writing, even though Linschoten specifically compares China’s literacy favorably to that of the ancient world—“there are many books in China, for they are very curious and desirous to write and register all things.” In the same way that the Algonquians are seen in *America* to be inferior culturally to the Ancient Britons, even massively literate and cultured China, despite



Figure 2.

Ormuz. Theodor and Johan Israel De Bry, *Ander Theil der Orientalischen Indien* (Frankfurt am Main, 1599), plate 6. Courtesy of the Rare Book Division of the Library of Congress.

having printing five hundred years before Europe (“they much resemble and surpass the ancient Grecians and Romans”), are considered unworthy of visual illustration. Raman reads another moment of European dominance over Asian culture in Linschoten’s voyage (see fig 2) in an engraving showing a European ship coming into port at Ormuz on the horizon above a scene across which various foreign practices are pictured. Like the Native Americans, these Asians cannot see and therefore comprehend what is about to happen with the arrival of that ship. The Asian guard in the foreground of the scene, fitted out in a Native American feathered headdress, looks on in ignorance, but the European reader of De Bry’s volume can see quite clearly the implications of colonization. The native is blinded and so could not see, even if he were shown it, the book in front of the European reader.

(The Portuguese had already held Ormuz for a century, in order to control trade between India and Europe through the Persian Gulf; by the time of Linschoten's voyage, the colony had already become somewhat decadent, for the Portuguese had long held Ormuz in order to control trade between India and Europe through the Persian Gulf.)¹⁰

In the second essay, Michiel van Groesen discusses the abridged version of the *America* series published in 1631 in German by Matthaeus Merian and Johan Ludwig Gottfried. While most scholars have treated this as a separate volume of the De Bry series, it is in fact an extension of the life of the multivolume *America*. It was published while the De Brys were also publishing the later volumes of the *Orientalis* series, and so the *America* frame continues to provide a contiguous context for the later volumes on travel to the Orient. While Merian and Gottfried reduced the thirteen volumes of the *America* series to a single book of six hundred pages, they still maintained the crucial argument about the land bridge theory of Amerindian migration between Asia and America. It was, as van Groesen summarizes, "a text no collection should be without." The cheapening of the edition was again a major consideration; the title page highlighted the aim of offering the information in "purchasable form." And like the original German edition of *America*, this abridged German version placed greater emphasis on the pagan alterity of American peoples, their nudity, cannibalism, and devil worship, than had been done in the Latin edition, or in the original models for De Bry's engravings.

The next two articles take up the various sorts of impact that New World material had on Europeans' thinking about themselves, not simply in relation to the newly discovered peoples of the world. Edward Test investigates the idea of human sacrifice as it was practiced for sacred purposes in the Americas and its influence on Shakespeare's rendition of the political sacrifice of Caesar in *Julius Caesar*. Dennis Britton scrutinizes Walter Raleigh's attempt to differentiate putatively peaceful English from violent Spanish colonial practices.

Distinguishing between Brutus's and Antony's two different understandings of Caesar's murder, one as a sacred necessity, the other as an act of secular violence, Test shows how the possibility of a sacral effect owes its complicated force in the play to the European understanding of Mexican religious ritual, while Shakespeare's play reveals, without passing judgment, the violent underpinnings of the early modern nation state. Britton traces Raleigh's attempt to erase the violence of British "discoveries" in South America.

By comparing Raleigh's *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewti-*

ful Empyre of Guiana to De Bry's illustrated translation of it in volume 8 of *America*, Britton points out how De Bry's plates nowhere show native Amerindian cannibalism (as in the other volumes) but do show an example of the Spanish eating each other. Thus, the social practices of Native Americans become a means for denigrating the Spanish, an instantiating effect of the "Black Legend," which other efforts to lessen the criticism of the Spanish did little to effect. New World cannibalism then becomes a means for talking about internal European difference, just as human sacrifice as practiced in the Americas could offer differentiating discourse for reimagining the history of Rome.

The final two essays deal with the relationships between the pictorial representations of Native American peoples in the De Bry series and visualizations of cultural difference in other illustrated works of the period. Ann Jones and Walter Mignolo deal with the visual filiations between the De Bry plates and Cesare Vecellio's costume book and Guaman Poma de Ayala's chronicle of Peru.

Jones tracks the differences among three separate versions of the visualizations of Central and South American natives in Benzoni, De Bry, and Vecellio. While the De Brys clearly sensationalize such acts as native suicides, emphasizing greater violence than that shown in the Benzoni volume's woodcuts, Vecellio's depictions incorporate the New World bodies into the format of European costume book portraits, which allows the indigenous past and the colonial present to cohere within the same spatial frame. Thus, Vecellio, eschewing any narrative focus, almost accidentally grants to the native South Americans a dignity and class position they lack in De Bry's engravings. Presented so that the reader can see specifically detailed clothes, the figures of South Americans reveal a simple decorative difference from Europeans, not a thoroughgoing lack of civilization.

Walter Mignolo's illuminating juxtaposition of plates from Guaman Poma de Ayala's *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* and De Bry's images from *America* surprisingly insists that Guaman Poma may have "used" the idea of a lavishly illustrated book to intervene in a European discussion about Indian worlds. Dedicating his book to Philip III, Guaman Poma thus addresses the same Western audience as De Bry. Guaman Poma, according to Mignolo, appropriated European written and visual semiotic codes in order to convey an Andean vision of life, cosmological history, and social organization. For some scholars, like Thomas Cummins, Guaman Poma insists upon the Andean artist's "intense and solitary intellectual struggle" creating both pictures and words and whose achievement might well com-

pare favorably with the De Brys' collective enterprise in illustrating texts by multiple others.¹¹ But for Mignolo, Guaman Poma's work "decolonizes" the kind of work that the De Bry volumes do in trying to silence the Indian. After Guaman Poma, the Indian can no longer be silenced.

. . .

This special issue of *JMEMS* attempts to "decolonize" the past in more ways than simply giving voice to Guaman Poma, as uncannily parallel as many of his images are to those in the De Bry collection. Bringing Guaman Poma into conversation with an anglophone history of European images—as exquisitely beautiful as the De Brys' are—may well be one of its most important effects. Guaman Poma's Inca textiles, rendered with such care, eloquently speak back to the nakedness of John White's Indians with their animal skin clothes. That Guaman Poma produced his volume during almost exactly the same time frame as the De Brys collectively produced theirs is only further refutation of the anthropological assumption about the achronicity of the contrast between the different stages of civilization enjoyed by Europe and America at the turn of the seventeenth century.

This special issue also aims to see how modernity has "colonized" the past itself as history, specifically how it has followed the De Brys in their instantiation of a primitive Asia, stripped of its antiquity and its letters as if that past which in actual fact preceded the ancient origins of Europe was an unlettered prehistory. The essays here offer a geographical destabilization of our contemporary global coordinates, in which Europe and America together form the "West" and the rest of the world is designated the "Third World." By reminding readers that America's unclothed and unlettered primitivism was in part the means by which Europeans readied themselves to colonize the entire world, it is possible to undo at least some of that colonizing force. America did, of course, grow up to be a part of Europe, as the image of the Pomeiooc girl in volume 1 of *America* promised, but all the violence depicted in the images of the subsequent De Bry volumes shows what was required to do so all across the globe. Even anglophone America was finally no different from the rest of the world (and possibly in terms of genocidal thoroughness even worse).

The Renaissance itself has been colonized as the birth of modernity; the very different assumptions about the arrangement of the globe that pertained when the De Brys published their work, which causes difficulty when we try to understand their very different use of "West" and "East," shows how alien the Renaissance itself is from the modernity which traces its

origins back to that moment. By allowing the New World to speak back to Europe and at the same time hearing what Europe heard, as well as uncovering what was buried until most recently, as in Guaman Poma's *Nueva corónica*, we are in a better position to move beyond our own Eurocentrism and to see not only the entire world differently, but also time itself. The "West" was not then the center of the world, but its newest periphery. The East was old, but so very old that it lost its history. This collection of essays reminds us that other histories did exist, and still do.



Notes

- 1 Michiel van Groesen, *The Representations of the Overseas World in the De Bry Collection of Voyages, 1590–1634* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
- 2 Bernadette Bucher, *Icon and Conquest: A Structural Analysis of the Illustrations of de Bry's Great Voyages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- 3 Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Stephen Greenblatt *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Maureen Quilligan, "On the Renaissance Epic: Spenser and Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (2001): 15–39.
- 4 The De Bry collection has a very complicated publication history. They were produced by the De Bry family in Latin and German (and vol. 1 of *America* in French and English as well) with various titles and in several editions; and many of the volumes were based on other printed works. For the sake of convenience, the volumes on the expeditions to the Americas are commonly referred to as *America* or *India Occidentalis* (13 vols. in Latin, 14 equivalent vols. in German); the volumes on the expeditions to Africa, India, and the Far East are commonly referred to as *India Orientalis* (12 vols. in Latin, 13 equivalent vols. in German). According to the title pages, Theodor De Bry was responsible for *America*, vols. 1–7; his sons Johan Theodor and Johan Israel for *America*, vols. 8–9, and *India Orientalis*, vols. 1–8; Johan Theodor De Bry for *America*, vols. 10–12, and *Orientalis*, vols. 9–11; Matthaues Merian for *America*, vol. 13/14; and De Bry's English son-in-law, William Fitzer, for *Orientalis*, vol. 12/13. Fortunately, a few minor exceptions aside, the plates are constant across editions. For a thoroughly detailed account of the publication history, including an account of all the illustrations—showing which were copied from other originals, which were modified from other originals, and which were new—see the three appendices of van Groesen's *Representations of the Overseas World*, 389–522. For a convenient bibliographical summary of the contents of the *America* series, see the website of the Library of Congress, "Krauss Collection of Sir Francis Drake: Grands Voyages," at http://international.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbdk/d031/inanalytics_america.html (25 July 2010).

- 5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).
- 6 Van Groesen, *Representations of the Overseas World*, 199–205 and 182–88 respectively.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 112–16.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 196–97.
- 9 Karen Robertson, “Conversion, a Child, and a Doll” (paper presented at the MLA Annual Convention, San Francisco, Calif., Dec. 27–30, 2008).
- 10 See Carmen Nocentelli, “Discipline and Love,” in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 205–24.
- 11 Thomas B. F. Cummins, “The Uncomfortable Image: Pictures and Words in the *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno*,” in *Guaman Poma de Ayala: The Colonial Art of an Andean Author*, ed. Rolena Adorno et al. (New York: Americas Society, 1992), 46–59.