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978-0-521-62229-5 - *Imagined Empires: Incas, Aztecs, and the New World of American Literature, 1771-1876*

Eric Wertheimer

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

ANCIENT AMERICA IN THE POST-COLONIAL NATIONAL IMAGINARY



Writing in 1891, at the fabled dawn of the United States' imperial power in the Western Hemisphere, José Martí made a plea for new histories:

The history of America, from the Incas to the present, must be taught in clear detail and to the letter, even if the *archons* of Greece are overlooked. Our Greece must take priority over the Greece which is not ours. We need it more.'

Martí's sense of the importance of teaching previously obscured history "to the letter" is surely right if we are to work toward an America that is commensurate with its utopian impulses. But just who *is* "we"?

I hope that Martí would forgive the displacement that occurs when his words are placed before a study of Anglo-American appropriations, written by an English-speaking North American, especially since this study is about the problems of creating possessive pronouns like "we" and "our" when making narratives of history and nationality. The contest and convergence of meanings pertaining to the term "America," among historical varieties of "us," is precisely the impetus behind this work. The "our" is never constant from chapter to chapter, just as the "Greece which is not ours" is always shifting; what it means to teach history "to the letter" is in constant question. Nonetheless, the terrain of study is defined throughout by a politicized sense of "our America." The effort to understand the story of "our America" – a multicultural, multinational set of relations expressing the promise of social justice – is, I believe, essential to the anti-imperialist, redemptive project Martí was engaged in. It

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is a struggle that many of us in American cultural studies, along with those outside the academy, attempt to keep alive. The dialectical nature of the word “our” – at once signifying possession and communality, within and without academia – can serve cultural study; we need that now, more than ever.²

Martí’s inducement leads me as well to the basic questions of my study: What did five important American writers, in the period spanning the early republic to just after the Civil War, think of as *American* history? What, for these authors, were republican America’s “native” origins and where were they to be found, given the problems that cluster around both terms, “native” and “origin”? How did they imagine that history? Why *that* history?

This introduction will describe the chapter-by-chapter analyses and attempt to account theoretically for the choosing of histories and the constructing of early American identities – “what, how and why *that* history.” Beginning to answer such questions requires a certain amount of cross-Atlantic interpretation, work that, perhaps surprisingly, leads to the intricate situation of “post-coloniality.”³ For such “indigenous” historicism in the newly “decolonized” republic was clearly a product of the race to construct national histories, to locate worthy antecedents for inscription into national narratives. Across the Atlantic from the western continents, Europeans were engaged in a similar project, furiously searching back, combing the annals of empire and civilization – Egyptian, Greek, Roman – trying to impart teleological, self-justifying stories of progress, renovation, and enlightenment. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans were classicists, no less than their European counterparts; but they were classicists with different geopolitical, and therefore historical, coordinates.

Of course, Europeans had started the “antiquating” of American history as early as the Renaissance, elaborating fantasies of Arcadia, Atlantis, and even Eden lying just over the geographical and temporal horizon.⁴ But while Europeans of the late eighteenth century put to rest their fantasies of locating in the American hemisphere a prior utopia that would serve as a mythic engine of empire, post-colonial Anglo-Americans found the very condition of post-coloniality a spur to theorizing American classical origins. In a flourish of Columbian thinking, they “newly” contemplated the precedents and possibilities of “American civilization,” pre-discovery and post-colonial. A

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certain form of exceptionalism believed America was a nation without precedent; but there was a vital tradition that saw exemplars in the New World. Americans of the colonies and states gazed out over a hemisphere covered with the enduring marks of Indians who, before the prospective rise of their own exceptional empire, had organized that space into empires. Thus, to call a collectivity or individual “Indian” was a more nuanced historical, political, and racial nomination than one might imagine.

Indians were not undifferentiated hunter-gatherers, this much most eighteenth-century history readers knew; after all, the New World had been the site of civilization and empire. Still, these were Indian states, which had to be fed into Enlightenment narratives of progress and decline, not to mention anticipatory narratives of national expansion across “destined” territories. These Native Americans had tampered with the “natural” teleologies of rational action and national organization.⁵ How to bring them fluently under the sign “American,” and even “classical republican,” was the problem for the literary epic. Why they were initially so important to the literary imagination is the theoretical problem at hand for this book.

I am broadly interested in the intersection of literature and international politics, how that overlap occurs in this period of American literature and which discourses enable it to be seen and which suppress it. This is of a piece with my interest in post-coloniality; I would hope that one is not merely a gloss for the other – that American colonial culture and post-structuralist revisions of colonial ideology are not as unrelated as the dearth of such criticism might make it seem.⁶ For my topic concerns the formation of an imperial self in America’s literature as that self relates to other elements of American New World history – the Incas and Aztecs. At the same time, the idea of proto-republican Indian empires was cultural hybridity itself. Not surprisingly, such hybridity engendered cultural aporia and political advantage; discursive conflict bolstered the accommodations of exceptionalism, and so conditioned the imperial ambitions of the new nation. Accordingly, the authors who exemplify that “national self” both resist and exploit, both make and unmake, the empire(s) that come with thoughts of *their* New World.

The obsession with a fantastic, quasi-“primitive” origin can be seen as part of the narrative of American nationalism. Incas and

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Aztecs, as historical figures of an idealized Other, were a politicized code in the early national period; one of the central inquiries of this book concerns the way this code was related to the consolidation of imperial power. By the mid-nineteenth century, pre-Columbian America, as a literary idea, had been wrung dry by a historical tradition that was serving a different order of national needs; the obsolescence of this kind of New World imagining was brought on, in part, by the emergence of the real transatlantic and North-South power of the republic. Both Melville's and Whitman's New Worlds were thus underwritten by varieties of national omission that produced both self-criticism and radical critiques of representation and imperial knowledge. Again, this book may be read as pursuing a paradigm of the literary culture of nationalism and empire, tracing a micronarrative of new epistemologies for a New World: first, the epic poems of origin, then novelistic histories of the necessary downfall of Otherness, and finally self-critical fictions of pluralism and erasure.

Beginning with a 1771 oration, my first chapter, "Commencements," examines the claims made on Philip Freneau's republican identity by the indigenous legacies of the Incas and Aztecs. In several key poems, I find Freneau struggling to articulate an epic destiny that denies its hybridity even as it utilizes a hybridized frontier logic. This chapter is critically foundational because it demonstrates just how well-versed Freneau and literary republicans like him were in the South and Central American history they claimed as native to the Anglo imagination. Chapter 2, titled "Diplomacy," focuses on Joel Barlow's quasi-epics, *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) and *The Columbiad* (1807), showing how Barlow structured America's "classical" Inca past and made it central to his exceptionalist designs, even as the Inca myth of origin vexed his concept of race. For the cosmopolitan poet abroad, New World history was a kind of symbolic museum – a place to experiment with the alluring and troubling terms of commercial self-invention. This chapter extends many of the analytical lines I begin in the chapter on Freneau, but follows them to a kind of crisis of national exceptionalism that is borne out in the formal and schematic properties of *The Columbiad*. That is, Barlow, in part because he neglects the genealogy of European exile that Freneau is careful to ascribe to Incas and Aztecs, begins to

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foreshadow the identitarian crisis of Anglo nativism – of claiming a native proto-republican Other as the anchor of Anglo national destiny.

Chapter 3, “Noctography,” bears out that crisis in its fullest dimensions. It dramatizes the issue of composition, and by implication the matter of civilization and barbarism, in William Prescott’s romance histories, *The Conquest of Mexico* (1843) and *The Conquest of Peru* (1847). Prescott, who was nearly blind, wrote with the aid of a device called a noctograph, which he claimed produced hieroglyph-like writing. Pursuing the operation of the hieroglyphic style through both histories, I argue that Prescott must maintain a theory of nationalist and racist hierarchies that threaten, in the very work of his own writing, to engulf both him and an imperial America.

Chapter 4, “Mutations,” reads the stories of Melville set off the coast of South America (“Benito Cereno” and “The Encantadas”) in the context of emerging theories of natural history. Those theories of natural creativity, of course, were based on Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell’s investigations of natural history in the same part of the world. I argue that Melville’s understanding of modern history (post-Columbian, post-conquest) is bound up in similarly Darwinian questions of “creativity” and “origins,” and is, in turn, articulated in the racial dimensions of both biological and national narratives. And yet Melville resists the racist implications of these early scientific epistemologies by elegizing, in ways mindful of the cultural violence of empire, the Spanish American historical and geographical setting. Here in Melville is the “time lag” or “caesura” of modernity so important to post-colonial criticism, where representation and Otherness have the space to articulate a different history, alternative to the forward “progress” of Anglo-American modernity.⁷

The concluding Chapter 5, on Whitman, called “Passage,” explores the final absence of pre-Columbians from the American literary imagination. Specifically, I analyze Whitman’s Columbus-inspired historical and geographical excision of non-“Manifest” America – Central and South America. Taking “Passage to India” as a crucial authorial and historicist reevaluation of his life of writing, I show how Whitman’s expansive vision attempts to sublimate or transcend the imperial implications of his own purification of Anglo New World pursuits. The omission of the “civilized” Indian leads

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me back to Whitman the nationalist author, and thus to the nexus linking the expanding nation and exportable print emblems of identity. I demonstrate how the “absence upon which we write” (to quote Whitman) is marked – how this affects his nationalist poetics, and how it alters our understanding of his relationship to the exceptional nation he attempted to delineate in print.

This book’s larger narrative about nationalist thinking now can be brought into clearer focus. Freneau and Barlow begin American literary “diplomacy” by projecting a nativist national imaginary, while Prescott begins to display unresolvable symptoms of the crisis of such instrumental nativism. With Prescott the projected genealogy starts to become self-consciously introjected when the consequences of empire (among others, the Mexican-American War) begin to have ethical and formal implications for his own methods of representation; that problematic introjection of the national imaginary is continued and intensified with Whitman and Melville.

For Freneau and Barlow, New World history stretches more or less “naturally” from the discovery and conquest of “American civilizations” to national independence; the Incas and Aztecs are potent myths affirming foundational republican precepts. And yet, such historical representations bear ominous and irresolvable problems of race and empire in America. Prescott begins to show ruptures that Barlow and Freneau were able to wash in their republican optimism; he places Incas and Aztecs within a ruined past that is mysteriously, but hazardously, legible. To narrate the story of their destruction, while representing the achievements of what was destroyed, is a task that becomes treacherous for an Anglo-American and Federalist Whig in the age of the Mexican War; Prescott’s skirmishes with the actors in his story become wars of representation that threaten to undermine the composition of his own national identity.

In the final chapters I press the “sign” of Columbus, and search the literary record for the pre-Columbian trace and absence. In Melville it is fading, while in Whitman the ancient American chronotope, along with the geography of all that is not North America, is erased in his post-Civil War poetry. What happened to the idea of ancient America in the mid-nineteenth century? The self-evident answer is that the United States’ official history became more Anglo and monocultural even as – and perhaps because – it became more

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multicultural in actuality; the “nativeness” of nationalism was no longer necessary. David T. Haberly, in “Form and Function in the New World Legend,” elaborates on these answers by explaining why “usable pasts” were not really necessary to the nationalist project of the nineteenth century.

During the course of the nineteenth century, the legend slowly disappeared from the literature of the United States, or changed in purpose and in form. It can be argued, in part, that the legend – which by definition looked backward rather than forward – did not have much of a chance against the forces of optimism, materialism, and progress, forces defeated only within Washington Irving’s texts. Beyond this, however, the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests that few American writers found it possible to discover a usable national past.⁸

Haberly’s explanation is useful to a point; which is to say that the “usability” of the New World past can be read in Melville and Whitman. While some “pasts” are elevated to national prestige, others are marginalized or “fused” out of the national imaginary.⁹ The past is “usable” insofar as it can be forgotten, denied, changed, found somewhere else.

Whitman’s work presents a good example of the past’s repressive use-value. Further estranging the Incas and Aztecs from an original New World history, even as he doggedly preserves the purely figural symbol of Columbus (who embodies, more than anything, the tragic ambivalence of Whitman’s centrifugal globalism), Whitman participates in the literary installation of U.S. history as a process of renewal and affirmation rather than retrospection and appreciation. Myth-making of this sort tells a story about the utility of displacement in national thinking, about the necessity to forget the “origins” of New World empire in order to further empire.

One consequence of this is that the Revolutionary moment had, by the middle of the nineteenth century and its attendant crises of nationality, become the obsessive starting line for the American narrative. All other narratives of New World nationality, particularly Indian and Spanish, were obscured, fulfilling the consolidating logic of the “national forgotten”; Columbus remained as the literary and emotional “dues payer” for a still-distorted New World map. The hybridity exemplified in Freneau, Barlow, and Prescott was seen for

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what it was by Melville – the genealogical construction of empire. And it had become too much to bear for the self-conscious “world power” of Whitman’s great hopes. In the culture at large, “Manifest Destiny” supplanted the New World imaginary; but the substitution did not nullify lingering, non-“manifest” claims.

The study of American literary nationalism’s relation to hierarchies of history and Otherness is, of course, not new. Primarily, I am indebted to the work of Roy Harvey Pearce, whose enduring *Savagism and Civilization* set many of the most important terms for thinking about the place of the Indian in the Anglo-American imagination.¹⁰ I hope to be augmenting and revising this work in important ways, adding insights enabled by more recent cultural theory and criticism.¹¹

This book also has as one of its critical lineages the study of the American frontier, since the frontier concept works to constitute early American national identity at myriad levels. The traditional frontier model, beginning not just with Frederick Jackson Turner but also with Argentina’s Domingo F. Sarmiento, exemplified the nostalgia and romance, not to mention racism, of nationalism; in many ways, early theorists of the frontier reproduced the worst effects of nationalism.¹² More recent theorists and historians of the frontier have shown it to be a quintessentially modern, and modernizing, formation, delineating mythic rigidities that serve capital, nation, literature, and language. Indeed, breakthroughs in thinking about the frontier are as multiple and imaginative as the site they theorize.¹³ Annette Kolodny summarizes the thrust of this work in her call for a radically different frontier, urging the recovery of the interwoven structure of contact and emphasizing the falsely mythic qualities of frontier rigidities:

We [must] let go our grand obsessions with narrowly geographic or strictly chronological frameworks and instead recognize “frontier” as a locus of first cultural contact, circumscribed by a particular physical terrain in the process of change *because of* the forms that contact takes, all of it inscribed by the collisions and interpenetrations of language. My paradigm would thus have us interrogating language – especially as hybridized style, trope, story, or structure – for the complex intersections of human encounters . . .¹⁴

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Given the scope of Kolodny's injunction and the embeddedness of the frontier myth, the frontier's reassessment needs to continue. Stressing the interpenetration, intersectionality, and indeed the porousness of frontiers is a welcome revision in thinking about the hybridity of these formations. Certainly this helps us counteract the static, linear logic of borders themselves; there can be no doubt the cross-woven frontier had, as Walter Prescott Webb put it in *The Great Frontier*, "length and breadth."

But I would argue that this in some ways rather old emphasis on "zoning" the frontier underestimates one of its most retrograde purposes: it was a place for positing the edges of difference – the constructed hard lines between contiguous Others. The term "frontier," with its connotations of division and limitation, has historical and theoretical resonances that we can still learn from, since such hard significations were essential to the formation of bordered national identities. I would argue further that hybrid identities emerge under the operations of both containment *and* intersection.

That said, I would add that frontiers are not only the first stage in the sharpening of borders, they are mobile; the American frontier is not necessarily geographically specific. It is a figurative site of national origins that derives its narrative power from deciding who is "civilized" and who is "barbaric."¹⁵ Although writers like Freneau, Barlow, Prescott, and Whitman never identify the Incas or Aztecs as products of the "frontier" as such, I treat them that way because I view their symbolic and political deployment as coextensive with an imperial imagination that was hegemonic in manifold ways; the frontier generated imperial ambition by binaristically processing each line of national, cultural, and historical difference. I am by no means the first to point out that the frontier can be geographical and psychological, and thus serve domination in its mobility – Melville was among the first to recognize this.¹⁶

Imperialism, as I use the word here, arises from a particular historical matrix delimited by a republican American "national imaginary" and an obsession with frontier thinking.¹⁷ By imperialism, I mean national thinking that envisions an expansionist and portable national presence, from the beginning of America's self-recognition as being independent. I also hold that the generation of empire afforded unique symbolic maneuvers related to the condition of post-coloniality. Indeed, republican America's imperial range must

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be viewed as simultaneously post-colonial and neocolonial (economic, as opposed to classic territorial, colonialism).¹⁸ That colonial paradox, consisting in double roles, is a feature not only of its continual identification at the frontier, but of its own exceptionalist ideas about itself. The two national conditions, post-coloniality and neocolonialism, are inextricable, and they may also be linked to the orientalist discourse of ancient America – a literary-historical mode that attempted to speak for the “mute” civilizations of the New World.¹⁹ This New World historicism of arrogating voices and influencing territories marks the frontier, as it were, between nation and empire, Manifest Destiny and Monroe Doctrine.

We tend to view Manifest Destiny as an aggressive form of nationalism, and the Monroe Doctrine as the diplomatic architecture of neocolonial imperialism; I would rather view them as the twin offspring of frontier thinking. Etienne Balibar links nationalism with imperialism and colonialism when he writes in “The Nation Form: History and Ideology” that modern nations are often the product of colonization as well as the crucible of a renovated colonialism: “In a sense, every modern nation is a product of colonization: it has always been to some degree colonized or colonizing, *and sometimes both at the same time*” (341, my emphasis). This is particularly true of republican America, and as such helps to clarify the dialectical tensions of the post-colonial imaginary I am talking about.²⁰ Imperialism inheres in the contradictory roles nations perceive for themselves as well as in what Balibar terms “precocious phenomena” and “articulated” wars that implicitly seem to disorient temporal continuities: “a decisive role is played by the precocious phenomena of imperialism and the articulation of wars within colonization” (341).

America’s own “precocious phenomena of imperialism” have yielded a somewhat truncated history of imperialism, beginning for most historians at the end of the nineteenth century.²¹ I take to be among those “precocious phenomena” the literary imaginings of epic national glory, even before the Monroe Doctrine’s neocolonial sign was imposed on the New World map. One of my aims is to recover, however partially, some of the origins of imperialism in American culture by examining those epic imaginings. These origins have seemed absent perhaps because they present to the cultural historian a bewildering chart of impossibly coexisting locations.