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978-0-521-00360-5 - Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians

Harry Liebersohn

Excerpt

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Introduction

One of Tocqueville's discoveries on his trip to the United States was an affinity between European aristocrats and American Indians. Here is his testimony from *Democracy in America*:

He thinks hunting and war the only cares worthy of a man. Therefore the Indian in the miserable depths of his forests cherishes the same ideas and opinions as the medieval noble in his castle, and he only needs to become a conqueror to complete the resemblance. How odd it is that the ancient prejudices of Europe should reappear, not among the European population along the coast, but in the forests of the New World.¹

The statement distills a generational experience. Many other travelers of the early nineteenth century, too, felt a sense of kinship with American Indians. A few of them – the most ambitious ones, like Tocqueville, also aristocrats – actually hunted and rode with Indians. Others glimpsed them from afar or simply repeated earlier travelers' tales. These gentlemen on tour – scientists, soldiers, and political refugees – were not just visiting the frontier for pleasure; out of their encounters with American Indians they were helping to shape a new aristocratic culture.

Their aristocratic vision opened up at a moment of peculiar affinity between the destiny of warrior elites from two worlds. On the European side, an elite formed after the end of the Napoleonic Wars that brought the successful survivors of the old order's collapse together with wealthy and educated members of the upper middle class. This new aristocracy was adept at taking up symbols of the old noble way of life and streamlining them into an acceptable culture for an increasingly industrial, commercial, and emanci-

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), 328. Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, part 1, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, ed. J. P. Mayer, introd. Harold J. Laski (Paris, 1961), 343–344. See also Harry Liebersohn, "Discovering Indigenous Nobility: Tocqueville, Chamisso, and Romantic Travel Writing," in *The American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 746–766.

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pated society. For members of this elite, travel to the North American frontier was a passage to a world of male warrior virtue.²

On the other side of the encounter were the native peoples who dwelt along the East Coast and Southeast, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers. Indian societies seemed to their admirers more aristocratic than Europeans themselves in their cultivation of warrior virtues. Among peoples favored by European travelers such as the Crows, the Mandans, the Osages, the Sauk and Fox, and the Blackfeet, boys learned from earliest youth on to cultivate qualities of courage, strength, bravery, and self-control that would bring success in hunting and battle. Myths and ceremonies were difficult for travelers to comprehend; horticulture and the role of women were uninteresting. But precisely their own background permitted elite Europeans to appreciate the brilliant dress of Crow warriors or the bravura of Osage hunters. These native peoples had the warrior's charisma that they had lost and wished to regain.³

European visitors could find parallels, too, between their own experiences of terror and exile in the years 1789 to 1815 and American Indians' struggle for survival. Peoples like the Iroquois and Hurons had thrived in the early eighteenth century by playing off the French, British, and Anglo-American invaders against one another. Later, the withdrawal first of the French and then of the British was for them a disaster. The Anglo-American victors pushed Indians westward from their native lands. Titled Europeans had themselves been recent victims of popular land hunger, and they knew how democratic societies could invent new laws to give legitimacy to expropriation. They could readily see through the deceptions of written treaties for Indian lands and knew the hardship of being driven from one's home. To be sure, many

2. The terms "aristocracy" and "nobility" do not admit of easy distinction. "Nobility" in pre-1789 Europe referred to a corporate, legally distinct, privileged elite. "Aristocracy" referred to the upper ranks within the nobility. Yet both "nobility" and "aristocracy" referred simultaneously to idealized personal qualities such as bravery, selflessness, adherence to a code of honor, and refined manners. After 1789–1790 the nobility no longer existed as a separate legal order in France; in Central Europe, privilege diminished over the course of the nineteenth century but persisted until 1918. For the nineteenth century I have generally preferred the term "aristocracy" to describe a social ideal that appealed to the educated and wealthy middle classes as much as to persons descended from families with pre-1789 noble origins. This emphasis on the newness of post-1789 aristocratic culture sets my interpretation apart from that of Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981), which argues for an economic, political, and cultural continuity of the old regime until 1914. Mayer's book remains a valuable starting point for reconsideration of the aristocracy's role in the nineteenth century.
3. For a recent scholarly perspective see Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading Through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805–1935* (Cambridge and New York, 1995). The classic description of Plains warrior culture remains Robert H. Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (1954; Garden City, N.Y. 1963).

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titled Europeans clambered back to status and comfort despite the loss of legal privileges. Some identified with the expansion of Anglo-American civilization and felt no special regard for its victims. The trials of revolution and dictatorship for over a quarter century nonetheless stimulated others to develop a tragic perspective on the human costs of the settlement of a new continent.

This book relates in three parts how an aristocratic discourse on American Indians took shape: in the transition from old regime to Revolutionary France, in French travel writing from 1815 to 1848, and in German travel writing of the same era. Each part includes one survey chapter and one chapter on a major writer. The major figures memorialize the aristocratic character of Indians in fiction, social science, and ethnography; the minor travel writers document a broad revitalization of aristocratic ideals. It is primarily a book of European cultural and intellectual history, but it examines how extra-European experiences tinted century-old traditions of behavior and belief.

Part I relates how the Romantic discourse took shape in response to Enlightenment debates on Indians. Our story starts with the philosophes' turn to the native peoples of Canada as natural democrats. After 1789 members of the old privileged elite, determined to tear down the philosophy of Rousseau that they blamed for the Revolution, took a new look at American Indians, sometimes denigrating figures elevated by the philosophes, sometimes discovering that Indians too were victims of revolutionaries. Chateaubriand, the subject of Chapter 2, dramatized the parallel between his personal suffering and the fate of American Indians in his novellas *Atala* and *René*. These works provided subsequent travelers with a style, a vocabulary, a cast of characters, and a set of landscapes for imagining Indians as native aristocracy.

The background to Parts II and III is the unsteady balance between elite control and democratic protest on both sides of the Atlantic. In France the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy after 1815 raised conservatives' hope that the movement of modern history toward democracy could be contained. Their confidence was jolted by the Revolution of 1830, which replaced the Bourbon monarch Charles X with his cousin of the Orléanist line, Louis Philippe. Modern society had lurched; it had a forward motion, felt by both French and German contemporaries, that could end in new catastrophes.⁴ Travelers to the United States received a second shock: the era of political rule by Virginia plantation owners and patrician Bostonians was over. Andrew Jackson practiced a populist politics, American society a disregard for status

4. On the unsettling effect of the Revolution of 1830, see Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg, 1986), 40–43.

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distinctions, that rankled elite visitors. This conjuncture of events is the setting for the climax of our story, the visits of a cluster of elite observers in the early 1830s. They came just in time to observe Jackson's policy of forced removal of native peoples to territories beyond the Mississippi. The exterminating logic of democracy as they knew it already from the Terror once again displaced classes and peoples as part of the cost of progress.

French Romantic travelers in America, the protagonists of Part II, were an unusually politicized group, their nerve ends sensitized by the rapid succession of regimes since 1789. In our overview of French travelers in Chapter 3 they debate the pros and cons of American democracy, with some of them criticizing the chaos of popular rule and others defending a free society. Memories of cooperation in New France, as well as ambivalence toward Anglo-America, fed into French fondness for their former native allies. Tocqueville (who visited North America in 1831–1832) made a special trip to visit Ojibwas in the wilds of Michigan. No one more pointedly made the analogy of Indian and European aristocratic ethos; no one more effectively linked the condition of native peoples to a critique of Anglo-American conquest. He synthesized the insights of a generation of travelers with singularly trenchant sociological analysis.

Just when Tocqueville and his contemporaries were taking the measure of the end of their colonial involvement, Germans began an era of mass migration to the New World. Their debates are the subject of Chapter 5. At home the German ruling classes after 1815, like their French counterparts, faced the uncertainties of reestablishing their authority after decades of revolutionary challenge. While not hit as directly by the French Revolution, they had to contend with more drastic social and economic changes, including a rise in population, the decay of artisanal modes of production, and overseas migration. Germans of all classes (in contrast to the predominantly elite French authors) argued over whether America offered dignity or misery to German immigrants. Indians were a regular topic of discussion within this controversy. While farmers and artisans and their middle-class defenders saw in them only an obstacle to settlement, elite travelers were scandalized by Anglo-American injustices. A few actually ventured into frontier territory, and one of them, Prince Maximilian of Wied, traveled with the artist Karl Bodmer to make a rigorous ethnographic record of Plains and Prairie Indians. Their words and images were as faithful to the original as human circumstances would permit, yet they embodied a distinctly Romantic vision of native aristocracy.

This is a story that crosses many borders, temporal and geographic, and I have attempted both to delineate and to keep open the movement of people

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and ideas across them. One such border has to do with intellectual style: from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, European descriptions of North American Indians shifted from a Neoclassical to a Romantic discourse. Enlightenment thinkers used classical allusions as a continuation of politics by other means: dressing up Indians in classical descriptions was a way to endow them with republican virtues. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Romantic writers turned this use of native societies upside down: developing their aesthetic and political ideas in response to the French Revolution, and anxious about their status as members of learned elites in a democratizing Europe, they discovered in American Indians an aristocratic ethos. Man in his original condition was no longer Rousseau's exemplar of equality but a being of rank and honor. In other respects, however, the legacies of the eighteenth century and Romanticism were not rigorously opposed in travel writing; one could uphold an enlightened scientific ethos while elevating natives' social status.

Another border is geographic. The differences between French and German travelers are great enough to recommend discussion of them in separate chapters. Pride in belonging to a great nation set the French apart from their neighbors across the Rhine, while the mass overseas migration of Central Europeans later conditioned the observations of German visitors to the United States. It would be anachronistic, however, to separate the elite cultures of France and Germany during the Romantic era without indicating, too, their many points of transition. French émigrés from the Revolution took refuge in Germany, and German artists and writers made themselves at home in Paris. This was the time, too, when Mme. De Staël wrote *De L'Allemagne* with the help of a lover who was one of the founders of Romanticism in Germany, August von Schlegel; when a French refugee, Adelbert von Chamisso, became one of the arbiters of German literary life; and when Alexander von Humboldt spent years living in Paris as a leader of its scientific establishment (and publishing his account of his voyage to South America in French) before returning to play the same role in Berlin. National loyalties mattered, but so did cosmopolitan conversations that transcended linguistic and state-imposed borders.

British travelers inhabited a world farther apart. The ex-colonial relationship between the United States and England was a love-hate affair without a Continental counterpart. The worldwide success of their commerce and empire-building encouraged an aloof British view of native peoples. Evangelicalism added a religious motive for repudiating the kind of enlightened curiosity that had inspired the members of Captain Cook's voyages in the late eighteenth century and condemning indigenous sexual and religious prac-

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tices. Above all, the British ruling class never knew the French and German experience of persecution, exile, and loss of status. While English travelers sometimes complained about American mistreatment of Indians, they more typically had the unromantic attitude of successful colonial masters. It was a bitter quarter century of seeing the world upside down that prepared Continental travelers for a sense of identification with the nobility and suffering they observed among Native Americans.⁵

While the accounts of English travelers diverge more than one might expect at first sight, Anglo-Americans offer more notable cases of convergence with French and German discovery of native aristocracy. Although many took pride in their countrymen's westward expansion and expulsion of native inhabitants, one needs to treat European condemnations of American heartlessness with critical caution. Others were moved to moral indignation by the government-sanctioned injustices culminating in Andrew Jackson's policy of forced appropriation of Indian lands. They, too, could indirectly criticize democratic hypocrisy and bolster their own sense of superior status by sympathizing with the peoples whom the artist George Catlin called "nature's noblemen."

The Romantic travelers to North America seem at first to take us to a sought-after destination: a zone of encounter between European and non-European cultures. Critics in recent years have challenged interpreters of European history to be less insular and to recognize the steady traffic of ideas going into and out of the subcontinent, steadily enriching its stores of art and thought.⁶ With their interest in Indians, the travelers appear to open up one avenue and permit us to acknowledge the flow of foreign influences. All that we have to do for an exercise in cosmopolitan history, it seems, is to take up the travel accounts and read.

5. For a general orientation to British attitudes toward native peoples in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987); and Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn., 1985). Although it lies beyond the scope of this book, the early history of New England offers striking evidence for the "aristocratic" character of Indians in European eyes. Karen O. Kupperman has made a sustained argument for the priority of status categories in the thinking of seventeenth-century English settlers, whose leaders could treat elite Americans as their status equals and describe them in the language of nobility. See *idem.*, "Presentment of Civility: English Reading of American Self-Presentation in the Early Years of Colonization," in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 193–227. James Axtell notes that Puritans found the long hair of Indian men an abhorrent symbol of personal pride and independence that reminded them of their Cavalier enemies. See Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York and Oxford, 1981), 59–62.

6. See, for example, Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, 1992).

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Anyone who follows this advice, however, discovers that travelers do not tell straightforward stories. How and what do they “see”? Travelers’ perceptions can never be neutral; they are formed by their home culture. What one scoops out as meaningful from the chaos of new impressions depends on unconscious processes of selection that have been formed since infancy. The clearest example of this is linguistic competence: what we hear is affected by the set of sounds we have grown up to hear. While our ears will absorb some of the sounds in a foreign language system, they will also miss significant distinctions. English speakers may be unable to hear the difference between *Ratten* and *raten* (“rats” and “advise”) in German, since they have not been trained to make a comparable distinction in their mother tongue. We can only sort out so much, and what we notice may be different from what natives think is important. The same is true for the whole range of human activities, from something as trivial as closing a door (not trivial in Germany if you forget to do it) to respecting religious taboos. As an isolated individual, no traveler can observe another culture without making systematic errors; as a member of one culture in regular contact with another, a traveler relies on predecessors from home and finds confirmation of his own misperceptions by reading them and seeing what they have seen. There is no sure-fire way for travelers to correct their perceptions, just as there is no guarantee that present-day scholars do not impose a modern belief system on past travelers.⁷

The Romantics themselves were the ancestors of our deliberations over these difficulties of cultural communication. Historians do well to turn to an era for guidance to its peculiar preoccupations, and we can look to the

7. On the tradition of linguistic relativity, see John A. Lucy, *Language Diversity and Thought: A Reformulation of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis* (Cambridge and New York, 1992); and Roger Langham Brown, *Wilhelm von Humboldt's Conception of Linguistic Relativity* (The Hague and Paris, 1967). See also the classic essay by Franz Boas, “On Alternating Sounds” (1889), in *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Chicago and London, 1974), 72–77.

The intellectual historians of anthropology, too, have made an effective critique of anthropology’s knowledge of “others” that makes us both more wary of the discipline’s claims to scientific status of a positivist kind and more sympathetic to the reports of pre-twentieth-century travelers. Travel writing no longer seems just like a prescientific or protoscientific prelude to anthropology, but may instead be examined as a form in its own right of knowledge about foreign cultures. From the large recent literature see the *History of Anthropology* series (Madison, Wisc., and London, 1983–); Marc Manganaro, ed., *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text* (Princeton, N.J., 1990); and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988). Accomplished anthropologists have recently turned to travel writing as an alternative to the monograph. See Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham, *Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and a Writer Encounter Africa* (New York, 1993); and Richard Price and Sally Price, *Equatoria* (New York and London, 1992). For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between travel writing and anthropology see Harry Liebersohn, “Recent Works on Travel Writing,” in *The Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 617–628.

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Romantics for a special form of engagement with language that can guide our understanding of them.⁸ It is no accident that theirs was a great age not only of curiosity about foreign cultures and expansion of the European canon of world literature, but also of translation, an art that the German Romantics in particular practiced with special creative skill. We may find in their traveling a parallel to the task of the translator. Travel writing is a labor of translation – literally, of “carrying over” from one place to another. To be sure, translations leave the original more or less behind, stuffing all the materials of a foreign language into differently organized cubicles. The self-centeredness of translations, though, does not entirely subvert communication. Otherwise we would not argue over good and bad translations, ones that get the original wrong and ones that get it right, ones that drain the spice and ones that keep it, ones that impose iamb and rhyme and ones that invigorate our own language with alien forms. And as Walter Benjamin argued, a translation can also be an *expansion* of the original, bringing out new dimensions of meaning in the medium of a new tongue. So it is with travel writing. Some of it is bad translation borrowed from older bad translations. Some shows a working knowledge of the foreign culture but is still too dependent on homegrown prejudice to yield original insight. Some leans on intuition without evidence. The best travel testimony combines insight and evidence, imagination and science. We shall encounter all of these kinds of writing in the accounts of Europeans who visited North America a century and a half ago.⁹

It is difficult to adopt a method of analyzing travel encounters that is supple enough to follow the movement of travelers and their writings across the many borders I have named. One school of writing about cross-cultural encounters, beginning with Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, has emphasized the moment of pure projection of Western power onto non-Western societies, in which Western scholars and artists have used other parts of the world as a *terra incognita* on which to write their fantasies of pleasure or cruelty while constructing an antithetical Western identity. Works in this tradition have had

8. This methodological precept is one of the enduring insights of Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973). For two brilliant historical examples, see the use of Hegel’s theory of personal development as a guide to Marx’s biography in Jerrold Seigel, *Marx’s Fate* (Princeton, N.J., 1978); and of Oedipal conflict as a model for understanding cultural modernism in Carl E. Schorske, *Fin de Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1980).
9. For a starting point in English, see Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and introd. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), 69–82; and “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” in *Reflections*, ed. and introd. Peter Demetz (New York and London, 1978), 314–332. Important background for understanding Benjamin’s theory of translation and its derivation from the Romantics is his dissertation, “Der Begriff der Kunst-kritik in der deutschen Romantik,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), vol. 1, part 1, 7–122.

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a critical function of challenging their readers to scrutinize the habits, language, and presumptions of the literary past for participation, voluntary or involuntary, in the work of colonialism.¹⁰ This kind of radical critique occupies a place comparable to the role of Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), whose universal suspicion of bourgeois thought revolutionized the Marxian cultural criticism of the 1920s and 1930s. Just as the brilliant clarity of Lukács's analysis gave way to the Frankfurt School's more differentiated and diffident investigations, however, the contention of an inherent colonialism in Western culture has given way to a blurrier map of cultural encounters.¹¹ The early modern era has been particularly fertile ground for this kind of reexamination. Each side, native and European, approached the other with what Stuart Schwartz has called "implicit understandings," a set of cultural assumptions that shaped its perceptions of foreigners; those assumptions underwent transformation in initial meetings and continued to change over later periods of time. In recent years the scholarship of early encounters has turned into a series of subtle and unpredictable adventures, restoring something of our own sense of wonder at the diverse stories that cultures tell about one another.¹²

Romantic travelers have a story of their own to tell, related to yet removed from the world of their predecessors. The early sense of wonder, of experiencing things new and fresh and marvelous to the point of incomprehensibility, had given way to back-and-forth borrowings.¹³ Richard White has recovered the history of a "middle ground" that was neither French nor native but

10. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). Cf. Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, 1988), for two stimulating recent interpretations of Western colonization of "others." Ruel W. Tyson, "Live by Comparisons": *A New Home for Reason in the University*, Sixth Annual Memorial Lecture of the Society for Values in Higher Education, introd. Agnes M. Jackson (Knoxville, Tenn., 1988), is an especially thoughtful meditation on the critique of colonialism as a challenge to inherited cultural habits.
11. For a fuller critique of *History and Class Consciousness*, see Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870–1923* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988), 190–196.
12. Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Implicit Understanding: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge and New York, 1994), especially the editor's introduction, 1–3, 15. Cf. Karen O. Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill, N.C., and London, 1995), especially the editor's discussion of the subtle changes in identity among groups on both sides of the Atlantic, 4–5, 22–24; and Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *New World Encounters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993). Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women at the Margins* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1995), suggests a new kind of global history that can capture the localness of European lives and their overseas transformation.
13. See the splendid evocation of the early encounters in Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, 1991), which, as its title suggests, balances its account of Europeans' sense of wonder with recognition of their imperial ambitions.

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a new constellation formed out of earlier cultures in the Lower Great Lakes region. The Romantic travelers who are the main focus of this book arrived after this middle ground had been torn apart and had given way to the deadly opposition of “Indian” and “white,” but they could still observe, and frequently comment on, the bits and pieces of it that survived, especially in the form of Indian friendliness toward French visitors and knowledge of their language.¹⁴ By their time, travel experiences had become, in James Boon’s term, “echoey”: their perceptions of Indian societies were inseparable from wave after wave of historical experience carried back and forth across the Atlantic.¹⁵ Old legends, learned prejudices, memories of colonial partnership, revolutionary traumas, shrewd Indian role playing for their visitors, and travelers’ posing for audiences back home came together in their testimony. The travelers themselves did not always like to see it that way; in their less ironic moments, they were convinced that one could meet pristine peoples if only one pushed far enough into the interior of North America. Paradoxically, they sought out a place they called a “wilderness” while selectively translating to merge its features with European memories of a high and ancient way of life. Discreet editing fashioned for themselves and their readers the fiction of natural aristocrats, unchanged since the creation, whom one could glimpse just before the democratic civilization of Anglo-America surged over and forever buried them. Their travel writings offered a vision of aristocracy as the natural condition of man before the turmoil and decay of historical time.

14. See Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge and New York, 1991).

15. See James A. Boon, “Cosmopolitan Moments: Echoey Confessions of an Ethnographer-Tourist,” in Daniel Segal, ed., *Crossing Cultures: Essays in the Displacement of Western Civilization* (Tucson, Ariz., and London, 1992), 226–253. My understanding of travel in an “echoey” age has also been enriched by idem., *Affinities and Extremes: Crisscrossing the Bittersweet Ethnology of East Indies History, Hindu-Balinese Culture, and Indo-European Allure* (Chicago and London, 1990); *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts* (Cambridge and New York, 1982); and *The Anthropological Romance of Bali 1597–1972: Dynamic Perspectives in Marriage and Caste, Politics and Religion* (Cambridge and New York, 1977).