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AML 4213: Journeys to America
Summer 2011

THE LOGIC OF OUR FIRST SET OF READINGS:

The readings in the first 1/4th of the course or so are/are not about the “U.S.”

“Early American Studies” over the last two decades or so has become “Early Americas Studies” and “Transatlantic Studies.” Scholars tend to focus these days less on the origins of U.S. national identity (the Pilgrim expedition), at least exclusively, than on friction/exchange among many cultures and geographical regions in the New World.

Thus we start with Columbus & Vespucci. And then we turn to Shakespeare’s The Tempest because—even though not very concretely about the New World—it aptly imagines power/tension within a contested geographical space. Many of our readings, one way or another, are about moving from one space to a culturally different space, about mobility and psychological/internal and political/external conflicts that ensue ... and thus the title of the course: journeys literally to America and journeys to the meaning of America (always vexed!).

Before 1776, folks writing in English in North America or about America think of themselves or America as part of the British Empire (which included colonies in the Caribbean). And so, after The Tempest, we next read Equiano’s Life of... (which takes place in Caribbean, England, and U.S.).

COLUMBUS:

We’re just reading a snippet from Columbus, his “Letter to Lord Sanchez.” Basically, he’s trying to get more funding, and so needs to “sell” his discoveries.

Historians still debate what Columbus thought he was up to. Perhaps his motivation was commercial. The Medieval Crusaders had opened up overland trade routes between Europe and the “Orient.” Spices and fabrics fetched high prices, but in 1453 Constantinople (Istanbul) fell to the Muslims/Turks, which made a land route going east from Europe awkward. Others had pondered going west, across the ocean, but the perceived length of the journey posed another problem: how could you, for instance, stock up on provisions in a wooden ship (no refrigerators!) for the trip? Clever Columbus calculates the length differently, making a venture seem viable.

Or maybe Columbus, a zealous man, primarily wanted to get to the Orient to convert the emperor of China to Catholicism.

Or maybe he wanted the spoils of new trade to bankroll a crusade to liberate the Holy Land from the “heathen” Turks.

Regardless: Columbus’s motivations are less interesting than how he reports what he “sees”. And what he “sees” is odd indeed ... odd in what we might say is his effort to manage cognitive dissonance.

Ponder the conflicting ways in which he describes what he “sees”:

1. Note all the proclaiming of nationalist honor as he takes possession.
2. Note the need to make the folk he encounters non-problematic (they don’t have weapons, etc.).
3. Note his emphasis on marvelous commodities and riches; anthropology doesn’t exist yet, and so he “sees” gold, doesn’t “see” the people very much.
4. It’s a garden of delights; a lot of pleasurable sensory overload... Except the natives... Might be... Cannibals... Yikes!
5. Note the tactful use of exchange: the natives will get the benefit of conversion; Spain get’s their land!

So, already, in this short piece: there are aesthetic issues (realms of visual pleasure), economic issues (what is a fair exchange), and rhetorical issues (how do you sell the whole venture to the people who are bankrolling you?).

The lesson: pay attention to the categories of discourse.

VESPUCCI & ENGRAVING:

Columbus never figured out he was in the “New World.” Because Vespucci knows he’s talking about a new realm, his rhetoric changes. He can, unlike Columbus, more strongly contrast the New World as a distinct geographical-cultural realm to Europe and its values.

Before New World discoveries, European Christendom was oriented toward seeing itself as less grand than ancient Rome and Greece. But the imperialistic mandate in the New World gives Europeans a new-found sense of domination & superiority. We know we are sophisticated, because, look... Here are some folks that are so primitive.

You see this clearly in the engraving of Vespucci: it’s all a schematic allegory of power, culture, etc. against supine/lazy natives. They need to be awoken to the forces of history!

MONTAIGNE:

Montaigne (writing later) inverts Vespucci: maybe “culture” is the distortion, and barbarous just means different, not inferior? Indeed, Montaigne, fatigued with the corruption of the court and etc., sees the natives living in a happy natural state. He introduces the contrast between “bad” civilization and “good” primitivism.

Yet: don't endorse Montaigne too quickly in his idealization of a natural state to critique European culture as corrupt/distorting. He in some ways is less anthropologically sound than Vespucci. Montaigne sees New World natives as lacking artifice, but all human communities are cultured one way or another if you think about it. The whole notion of the primitive/cultured antithesis may be bogus!

To say this more emphatically: with Montaigne we begin to see a nature/culture dichotomy that still perplexes us. All of you eco-inclined folk (myself included in that group): you rely on a nature=good/culture=artifice way of thinking. That was inconceivable before the Renaissance; the Renaissance kicks in our still-current celebration of the "pastoral", in which being "natural" is potentially better than being "civilized" or obsessed with court politics (the court of Queen Elizabeth).

Here is a schematic diagram to contrast Montaigne to Vespucci:

barbaric	
no order	covetousness (property)
no legal order	corrupt taste
license	unnatural
hedonistic	deceit
(for Vespucci=above)	(for Montaigne=above)
STATE OF NATURE	CULTURE
(for Montaigne=below)	(for Vespucci=below)
idyllic	law
pastoral	order
uncorrupted	technology
simple virtue	proper hierarchy
pre-political	property cultivated
communal	