The Colonial City: Eden, Amazonia, and the Humanist Imagination

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This article explores how the humanist imagination of early modern Europe was used to legitimize European colonial endeavors throughout the Americas. It focuses on "humanist-cum-colonial" legislation such as natural slavery, terra nullius, and civilitas to argue that early modern humanism aided colonists in conflating indigenous people with landscapes, in order to exploit both as natural resources. It explores the Pythagorean issue of torrid zones, the mythologies of La Malinche and Pocahontas, and the urban gridiron plan. The article ultimately concludes with a reflection upon archaeology itself, and the discipline's connections to the "humanist-cum-colonial" traditions of the early modern period.

Introduction

Humanism of the early modern period is often discussed through a geographic lens focused on Europe, however, its influence was far and wide, reaching parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas on the tides of colonization. This article seeks to explore the relationship between humanism and colonization while positing that the two together, referred to as a humanist-cum-colonial tradition, forever altered the early modern world. In particular, the classically inspired notions of torrid zones, *natural slavery*, *terra nullius,* and *civilitas* produced a paradox of the real and imagined, of Eden and Amazonia, within the Americas and other colonized spaces. It is from this humanistic imagined and paradoxical earth that a hetero-patriarchal rule was born, conflating the bodies of indigenous and enslaved people with natural resources, and birthing colonial cities.

Early Modern Humanism

While debates abound regarding the dangers of linear time and periodization, the beginning of the early modern period in Europe is generally affixed to the mid or late fifteenth century.[1] This period of time is characterized by massive social, political, and economic upheaval, resulting in the popularization of humanism throughout the continent. Early modern humanism began in fourteenth century Italy before spreading throughout Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its founding tenets promoted civic duty, an individual desire for knowledge, and an education firmly rooted in the liberal arts or the study of classical grammar (*grammatica*), rhetoric (*rhetorica*), history (*historica*), and poetry and moral philosophy (*poetica ac moralis*).[2] The early modern humanist, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, illustrates the importance of a classically rooted education in his never performed 1486 speech, *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* stating:

> the dignity of the liberal arts…and their value to us is attested not only by the Mosaic and Christian mysteries but also by the theologies of the most ancient times. What else is to be understood by the stages through which the initiates must pass in the mysteries of the Greeks? These initiates, after being purified by the arts… were granted admission to the mysteries…[3]

A classical education, according to Pico, therefore yields divine Christian knowledge and brings one closer to God. This notion of divinity through classical education is essential to humanism and is found throughout early modern humanist literature such as Leon Battista Alberti's, *On the Art of Building* (1485), Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513), and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Humanists subsequently came to believe that a liberal arts education was the key to "civilization," and this linear evolution ultimately influenced a range of subjects such as the arts, religion, philosophy, politics, and science.[4]

As humanism spread throughout Europe it challenged and upended medieval Judeo-Christian geographic conceptions of the world.[5] The sixth century B.C.E. Greek philosopher Pythagoras and his claim that the earth was divided into five climatic zones (two temperate, two frigid, and one torrid) was revitalized by early modern humanists and applied by European explorers to previously uncontacted regions of the globe.[6] Through a Pythagorean-influenced humanist view of the world, Europe was regarded as a temperate zone while parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas were considered torrid zones or, unimaginably hot regions of the world burnt by the sun, and thus uninhabitable.[7] Furthermore, as European explorers traveled these torrid zones, they became colonial agents of early modern European states, investigating, extracting, and exploiting the environments and people of foreign lands for economic, social, and political gain.[8] Colonists within the Americas specifically, were met with

geographies, worlds, and people that simultaneously lived within (as torrid zones) and without (as previously inconceivable places) their early modern worldview. Humanist understandings of theology and philosophy created a confusing colonial paradox that understood the encountered lands and spaces of the Americas as being simultaneously nowhere and inhabited by no one, *and* somewhere and inhabited by someone.[9]

According to this perspective, the Americas, and parts of Africa and Asia, should have been geographies of flames where nothing could grow, live, or survive; instead, however, colonists were met with living, healthy people, diverse empires, and landscapes of "…wheat, meat, fowl, gold, and gems…" they often described as Edenic.[10] This paradox of habitable/uninhabitable lands, and imagined/unimagined people ultimately led European colonizers to further rely upon humanist interpretations of classical and biblical literature, law, and mythology. Consequently, the humanist-cum-colonial imagination that encountered colonized and soon-to-be colonized lands, perceived torrid zones through racial lenses that transformed foreign people into the Other, and posited itself as the discoverer, dreamer, and creator of "new" worlds.

Lands and Bodies

The humanist reinterpretation of Pythagoras's torrid zone theory adopted by European colonizers incarcerated the indigenous people of Asia, Africa, and the Americas within a cabinet of curiosity that labeled them as either gullible and innocent children of Eden or ferocious and beastly demons of Amazonia. In his 1552 published condemnation of physical colonial violence, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account,* Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, the 16th century Dominican friar, refers to the indigenous people of the Americas as:

> the most guileless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity, the most obedient to their native masters and to the Spanish Christians whom they serve. They are by nature the most humble, patient, and peaceable, holding no grudges, free from embroilments, neither excitable nor quarrelsome…[they] are the most devoid of rancors, hatreds, or desire for vengeance of any people in the world.[11]

Thus, according to de las Casas, the indigenous people of the Americas are innocent children, to be nurtured by the paternal Catholic Church, and protected from the sins of colonial greed and physical violence; they are Eden's Adam and Eve before The Fall.

Alternatively, in his 1547 treatise, *Democrates Secundus: Of the Just Causes of War against Indian*s, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a 16th century Spanish humanist, refers to the indigenous people of the Americas as people who abide by, "barbarous institutions and customs," and:

> are devoted to all kinds of intemperate acts and abominable lewdness, including the eating of human flesh… [and] that prior to the arrival of the Christians…they made war against one another continually and fiercely, with such fury that victory was of no meaning if they did not satiate their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies…[12]

De Sepúlveda's depiction of indigenous people disputes the innocence of de las Casas's "children" and instead describes them as bloodthirsty cannibals akin more to ferocious animals than human beings; they are monsters of Amazonia, intent on bloodshed and violence.

Both authors imprison the indigenous people of the Americas into fixed behavioral categories, thus completely dehumanizing them by denying or masking their agency in their narratives. It is de Sepúlveda however, who subsequently advocates for the enslavement of indigenous people because they do not possess "… science

nor even an alphabet, nor do they preserve any monuments of their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences depicted in certain paintings, nor do they have written laws.…"[13] He supports his argument with the Aristotelian notion of *natural slavery* claiming, that because of their seemingly natural or uncivilized existence, it is the very nature of indigenous Americans to be enslaved.[14] Indigenous life essentially becomes indigenous land, a thing to be naturally exploited and used. Natural slavery soon gave way to the early modern paternalistic dogma of *civil slavery* which legalized the purchase, sale, and trade of people of African descent because of their relation to the biblical figure Ham and seemingly uncivilized societies.[15] European colonists, therefore, relied upon notions of natural and civil slavery in order to conflate the bodies of the enslaved with soon-to-be or already colonized lands and to justify their simultaneous exploitation of people and nature.

While Aristotle provided humanist-cum-colonists with ample resources regarding the enslavement of the Other, to/for the citizens of Pythagoras's torrid zone, the Roman legal concept of *res nullius* further strengthened European claims to foreign lands. The ancient legal principle, which roughly translates to "things belonging to no one," as summarized by Gaius, the second century C.E. Roman jurist, implies that unowned "things," being anything from manmade objects to animals, can be seized and through seizure made private property.[16] Additionally, another classical method of legal seizure, known as *terra nullius* or "lands belonging to no one," in the early modern period, was applied to American landscapes that were, from a humanist perspective, unowned, unused, and uncultivated by indigenous inhabitants.[17] Furthermore, the enactment of *terra nullius* throughout the colonized or soon-to-be colonized Americas was accompanied by an early modern system of hetero-patriarchal rule that most often envisioned men as owners and managers of land, thus legally subjecting women to passive, "natural" roles of housekeeping, pregnancy, and childrearing.[18] As European colonists seized and cultivated indigenous American and African people and land, it was their right to plant, or impregnate, what now seemingly belonged to them. Therefore, the seizure of "unused" indigenous land, a tradition still wholeheartedly embraced by the United States,[19] transformed the body of the enslaved, viewed through a humanist lens of natural and civil slavery, into a natural resource for the colonial master to commodify, extract, and exploit; the body became the land. Nowhere is this personification of *terra nullius*, alongside the humanist Eden vs. Amazonia paradox, more evident than in the narratives and stories surrounding two of the early modern world's most famous indigenous women, La Malinche and Pocahontas.

La Malinche and Pocahontas

Known by many names throughout history such as Malinalli or Marina, La Malinche was an indigenous American woman integral to Spain's early modern conquest of what is today Mexico. While she left no identifiable records, a majority of what we do know about her comes from 16th century records written by men, such as Spanish conquistadors Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo. She was most likely born sometime around 1500 in a Nahuatl-speaking village of southeastern Mexico, where she was enslaved and eventually moved to the southern Mayan-speaking region of Tabasco. While in Tabasco she learned Mayan, was then sold to Hernán Cortés, learned Spanish, before being baptized a Catholic, assuming the title and name Doña Marina.[20] Throughout Cortés' conquest of Mexico she was his translator or, as he often described her, his *la lengua* or tongue, even supposedly uncovering and informing the Spaniards of a planned Aztec surprise attack, seemingly committing herself to the success of Spain's conquest.[21] Around 1523 she gave birth to her son, Martin, fathered by Cortés who, within that same year, gave her as a gift and wife

to Spanish colonizer Juan Jaramillo. She is absent from the historical record until her death about six years later around 1529.[22]

Within Mexican history and mythology, La Malinche has historically been characterized as the mother of Mexico's mixed-race population (*la madre de la cultura mestiza),* a traitor, and a whore.[23] She is often conflated with the murderous and ghostly mother figure of La Llorona and serves as a moral foil to the chaste Virgin of Guadeloupe (*La Virgen de Guadalupe)*.[24] Her legacy, therefore, remains trapped within de Sepúlveda's 16th century humanist-cum-colonial argument of indigenous barbarity and lustful violence. Her name has entered the public lexicon as *malinchista* or traitor, and she is even associated with the derogatory term *la chingada,* which loosely translates to "fuck" in English.[25] The explicitly violent overtones of this association, alongside her enslavement and child by Cortés, further ties her body to humanist notions of *terra nullius*. As the Spanish destroyed, transformed, and planted their colonies throughout indigenous American lands, they destroyed, transformed, and impregnated La Malinche's indigenous body. Her Catholic baptism, adoption of the Spanish language, and the birth of her son mirror the destruction of indigenous identity, lands, and culture at the hands of early modern Spanish colonizers. The story of her body is written in the land; her flesh, a natural resource.

If the humanist narratives of the early modern period depicted La Malinche as the whore of colonization, Pocahontas, in turn, s represented as the virgin of empire. Known by many names throughout the historical record such as Amonute and Rebecca, Pocahontas was an indigenous woman integral to Britain's early modern conquest of what is today the United States. While she left no identifiable records, a majority of what we do know about her comes from 17th century records written by men, such as colonizers John Smith and John Rolfe. Born nearly one hundred years after La Malinche in the last decade of the 16th century, Pocahontas was a member of the Algonquian Powhatan Confederacy.[26] In 1607 she met John Smith, an English colonist tasked with establishing the British settlement of Jamestown and its colony of Virginia. Six years later she was kidnapped and held prisoner in Jamestown where she was subsequently baptized a Christian and assumed the English name, Rebecca.[27] In 1614 she married colonizer John Rolfe, giving birth to her son, Thomas, a year later, and then traveling to Britain as a diplomatic representative in 1616, dying the following year in Gravesend, Kent where her remains lie today.[28]

Within United States' history and mythology, Pocahontas has traditionally been characterized as an innocent and noble "Indian Princess" who benignly aids the supposed peaceful British in their colonization of North America. She serves as an Edenic emblem of the United States' seemingly abundant resources and land, and is often reified as a chaste, passive, and prepubescent symbol of colonization's "civilizing" powers.[29] Whereas La Malinche is akin to de Sepúlveda's cannibals, Pocahontas's constructed narrative is in line with de las Casas's children. A letter from her husband John Rolfe to Sir Thomas Dale dated 1614, draws humanist comparisons between her and the biblical wives of the Israelites, hinting at the "dangers" of miscegenation if Rolfe were to marry her before her Christian baptism.[30] Furthermore, a letter from John Smith to the British Queen Anne of Denmark dated 1616, notes Pocahontas's role in the colonization of Virginia as "…she next under God, was still the instrument to preserve this colony from death, famine and utter confusion…"[31] These humanist-cum-colonial characterizations of Pocahontas coincide with the notion of *terra nullius*, albeit in a different format than La Malinche's narrative.

Whereas La Malinche's identity, body, and land are violently ravaged and cultivated by colonization, Pocahontas's identity, body, and land are peacefully refined and civilized through colonization. Her body, like

Virginia, is transformed from a supposedly torrid zone into a temperate one through European intervention. Her body bears no stains of violence like La Malinche's, but instead flourishes with children, trees, and new plantations. Through an early modern humanist-cum-colonial perspective, both indigenous women, their people, and lands were unused; their bodies, according to the dogma of natural slavery, uncultivated; and their torrid zone lifestyles, barbaric, thus inviting the European legal ideology of *terra nullius*. Both classifications of innocence and guilt, naiveite and violence imagine soon-to-be colonized lands and people as *things*: Virginia-via-Pocahontas yearns for and openly accepts civilization, while Mexico-via-La Malinche must be tamed and suppressed beneath it. This colonial conflation of indigenous body and resource, rooted in humanist liberal arts, subsequently gives birth to the colonial city.

The Colonial City

Through the humanist inspired doctrines of *terra nullius,* natural slavery, and civil slavery, early modern colonists perceived the fertilization of soon-to-be colonized lands with the insemination of soon-to-be colonized women. Colonies, therefore, required cities of fertile, free, indentured, and enslaved men and women, alongside fields and farms of fertile land to sow, reap, and grow economic profits, and future generations.[32] It would take many decades after 1492 for early modern European empires to codify building laws, but the planned gridiron city eventually proved to be a popular choice for transforming indigenous environments into colonial lands.[33] These cities, inspired perhaps by popular humanist treatises on architecture, Alberti's *On the Art of Building* (1485) for example, or derived from indigenous American architectural forms, like the Incan cities of Ollantaytambo and Chucuito, or the Aztec capital of Technochtitlan, with their wide streets, ever-expanding squares–location willing–and ordered boundaries, allowed the surveillance and population control that early modern European empires desired for their colonies.[34]

As colonial territories grew over time, colonists understood that a flourishing colonial city required special attention to the health and safety of its residents. The gridiron's mathematically planned wide streets, rationally based navigable and replicable thoroughfares, and focal meeting points were deemed essential to a humanist-inspired healthy and ever-expanding commercial and civic center.[35] Its ordered form was also believed to help in the regulation of filth, crime, and natural disasters.[36] Additionally, the early modern colonial city became an ideological space of humanist-cum-colonial law and order, through a revitalization of the ancient Roman concepts of *civilitas* and *rusticitas*. These concepts positioned the Roman city as mediator between the civilized and barbarian, or the early modern city between colonist and indigenous.[37] In this sense, the gridiron imposes law and order, both in its procedural decrees and material form, upon foreign, *rusticitas*, and recently transformed landscapes, *civilitas*. Its orthography combats the unknowns of the outside world, abolishing natural curves, shadows, and crags with structured sightlines that allow the viewer to gaze, or give the illusion of gazing, panoptically upon the colony.

The panoptic city that imaginatively arises from the colonial urban gridiron subsequently transforms the colonial magistrate, police, and governor into an illusionary "solar eye" that looks down upon the city like a god.[38] Its design is simultaneously easy to replicate upon the "unimaginable" environments of soon-to-be colonized lands, and within the maps, documents, and briefs of colonial records. It is the colonial gridiron that physically categorizes indigenous land, and therefore bodies, into literal squares and boxes that are bound and branded by European place names and classically inspired architecture. Finally, it is the establishment of the colonial city via the humanist-cum-colonial traditions of torrid zones, *terra nullius,*

natural slavery, and *civilitas* that sees the excavating archaeologist extract, exploit, and engage with indigenous, enslaved, and colonized land, bodies, and life.

Conclusion

Archaeology is a discipline founded on rational principles, inspired by early modern humanism and, especially within the Western Hemisphere, practiced on colonized lands.[39] As archaeologists our research is dependent upon the natural world; from excavation to conservation, lab analysis to museum curation, we work with soil, seawater, and saliva on a daily basis. While many scholars throughout the decades have questioned our methods, interpretations, and theories, it is of utmost importance now to re-evaluate and continue questioning our coloniality.[40] The bodies of indigenous and enslaved American and African people, conflated with the colonized lands of the early modern period through humanist-cum-colonial traditions, still exist in the fabric of our cities, psyche, and soil. What does it mean for humanist trained archaeologists to excavate in what were previously considered to be torrid zones? What Pico-like "miracles" do we encounter and possibly inflict upon those still trapped within a "natural" cabinet of curiosity? And how does a field rooted in colonialism begin reparations?

The early modern humanist-cum-colonial tradition is dependent upon classical texts and colonially transformed goods that are intricately tied together through violence. The Aristotelian passages used to argue for natural slavery bear the blood of ethnic genocide, just as the colonially planned cities of New York City and San Juan exhibit humanist architectural virtues. Likewise, the humanism that informed early modern European architecture, also informed massacres, just as the colonialism that informed early modern hetero-patriarchy informed Virgilian agricultural practice. The web spun by the humanist-cum-colonial tradition is large and complex.

The power of the humanist imagination, the colonial city, and its paradox of Eden and Amazonia is in its portrayal of what is natural and *rusticitas, civilitas,* and torrid. As scholars who engage with anthropologically informed theory, which is also colonial, we have an ability to see past this paradox. We will never truly dismantle the humanist-cum-colonial traditions that support us, however, until we deconstruct them and extract ourselves from their tangled social, political, and economic systems; systems, it should be noted, that we have helped create. Imagination is a powerful thing, and it is that which we must depend upon as we move through time, and hopefully towards an era of anti-colonization.

Endnotes:

1 Cooper 2013; Loomba 2014; Moxey 2013, 23–36.
2 Kristeller 1978, 589.
3 Pico della Mirandola 1956, 25.
4 Kristeller 1978, 586.
5 For notes on the medieval Judeo-Christian world, please see Obrist 2015; regarding Early Modern European contact with Africa, see Lowe 2007; Tymowski 2014.
6 Sanderson 1999, 669.
7 Wynter 1995, 22; for the Medieval torrid and temperate zones' celestial and geographic relationship to paradise, please see Obrist 2015, 55–57.
8 Featherstone 2006; Stoler, 2002.
9 McKittrick 2013, 6.
10 *Histoire naturelle des Indes* (1996, 265); For other instances of Early Mmodern Edens throughout the Atlantic, please see Householder 2007; Berns 2014; Scott 2010; Cyzewski 2014.
11 de las Casas 1992, 28.
12 Mintz and McNeil 2018b.
13 Mintz and McNeil 2018b.
14 Parise 2008, 117–134.
15 Wynter 1995, 34–37.
16 Benton and Strauman 2010, 14–15.
17 Benton and Strauman 2010, 5–11.
18 Moore 2016, 545.
19 Marizco 2020, *NPR*.
20 Godayol 2012, 62–65.
21 Cortés 1971, 73.
22 Downs 2008, 397–400.
23 Over the past thirty years, however, queer and feminist Chicana scholars have fought to reclaim her narrative and add further dimension to her history; please see Godayol 2012, 68–70.
24 For a comparison to La Llorona please see, Simerka 2000; for a comparison to the Virgin of Guadeloupe see, Petty 2000.
25 Kessler 2005, 80–84.
26 Hantman 1990, 676–677.
27 Downs 2008, 399.
28 Paul 2014, 90–91.
29 Downs 2008, 405–406.
30 Rolfe 1907, 241.
31 Mintz and McNeil 2018a.
32 Casid 2005, xvii.
33 For Spanish building laws please see Low (1993); for British legislation Wilson 2016.
34 For information regarding Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* please see Jäger (2004); for broad historiographical explorations of the gridiron in Spain and Latin America please see Gasparini 1993, Low 1993, and Rose-Redwood 2008.
35 Wilson 2016, 101–102.
36 Dawdy 2008, 68–74.
37 Kagan 2000, 26–28.
38 de Certeau 1984, 92.
39 For archaeology's humanist principles please refer to Karmon 2011; Rowe 1965; Roberts 2015.
40 Please specifically refer to Atalay 2006; Battle-Baptiste 2011; Dawdy 2010; Silliman 2010; Tuck and Yang 2012.

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