

Ethnocentrism as Act of Kidnapping: The Procrustean Complex in the West

Paul A. Griffith, PhD
Department of English
Lamar University
P. O. Box 10023
4400 MLK Boulevard
Beaumont, TX 77710, USA.

If our notion of “history” ignores the inner life of a people, we end up with all the “facts” but we are likely to miss the point. [. . .] [T]here is far more to history than a succession of external events. “Any culture is a series of related structures which comprise social forms, values, cosmology, the whole of knowledge and through which all experience is mediated. The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society.” (Highwater, 1991, p. 36)

Conjuring essentialist assumptions of an invariable human nature, a genealogy of Western thinkers promoted a discourse of self and Other to assign Europeans the ultimate reference point with regard to human characteristics and achievements. Such centrist conceptualizing functioned to channel popular fantasies about primitives into self-validating myths and to exclude preliterate peoples from history and human society.ⁱ

Racializing doctrines of this sort are outgrowths of outrageous failings in our history.ⁱⁱ Yet the global devastation Western imperialism set in motion cannot be accounted for purely as a crisis of epistemology; for imperialists were not innocently misreading societies they termed “primitive.” Parading a body of metaphors that dispersed Western culture and consciousness as “civilization,” Western imperialists construed ethnocentrism as moral guardianship to popularize self-serving aggression as the “white man’s burden.”ⁱⁱⁱ Europe’s selfish and narrow interests, Edward Said (1994) remarks, militated against global varieties in cultures (p. 20). Its teleological indictment of difference, Mariana Torgovnick (1990) also recalls, has been a catalyst for mass destructiveness: Thus “groups or societies deemed primitive become available to ‘higher’ cultures for conquest, exploitation, or extermination: the partition of Africa, the invasion of Ethiopia, the Nazi “final solution” for Gypsies and Jews, for example (p. 13).

Eighteenth century Americans understood the terrorist implications of such imperialist dominance. The revolutionary war was fought against these pressures of socio-psychological imprisonment whereby European authorities subordinated the colony. Nevertheless America grew to adopt the centrist ideology that had driven the Western imperial powers it challenged. To some extent, this transformation can be seen in the role America inherited from the Spanish and French in Haiti, the dominant European authorities that initially claimed control over the island the Spanish first named Hispaniola.

The United States 2004 intervention in Haiti to carry out what Deborah Jenson (2005) describes as the “alleged kidnapping of Aristide,” the Haitian president (169), carries politically and historically symbolic ramifications regarding the historical drama of Western imperialist monologia in the Caribbean, Haiti forming an example that this paper examines. The United States political intervention witnessed to the rhetoric of justification such as that Robert Lawless (1992) had labeled “bad press,” an influence of the self-flattering projection or inclination to narcissism that Paul Diel (1980) refers to as “banalization.”

“Bad press,” a mode of conscription or kidnapping via rhetoric, has long been a method, a strategy of imperialist hegemonic self-fashioning.^{iv} Postcolonial critic Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) has consistently argued that language is the principal instrument used by colonizers to dominate the cultures of colonized people and to alienate them from their familiar world. He has also demanded a “counter-discursive” “tactical assault on colonial assumptions about representation” to unloosen this political and psychological stranglehold. George Lamming (1960) had evoked a similar demand for “linguistic decolonization” and freedom.

He drew on Caliban's indictment, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, of the perversity Prospero intended in imposing the self-alienating structures of transplanted European languages on Caliban and his island. Caliban rebukes Prospero's act of kidnapping whereby the colonized person is deprived of positive self-defining symbols. In Act 1 Sc ii, he curses Prospero for having robbed him of his island, and fulminates against the imprisoning symbols imposed on him to induce his self-betrayal: "You taught me language; and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse; the red plague rid you./ For learning me your language!"

Via this coercive enterprise of "bad press," meant to universalize his language, the colonizer conscribes others in metaphors according to which they either fail to recognize themselves or "curse" the images of self they are unable to accord with the foreign metaphorical ideal. It is this "curse" or angst of self-alienation that Toni Morrison dramatizes, for example, in *The Bluest Eye*. Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* recognizes the insidious paradox in this cooptive language game. Treated as a possession that the British fortune-hunter Edward Rochester annexes through marriage merely for economic advantage, she is but an unclaimed or empty space the West associated with non-Western geographies. It is this worship of the imperial cause and the crass human insensitivity that underwrites the colonialist acts of brutal robbery that Marlow condemns in *Heart of Darkness* (20).

Similarly, Antoinette understands that to Rochester she has no value except what can be bestowed through him. Thus she pleads to Rochester who admits that he can offer only "[w]ords—less than nothing": "Say die and I will die" (92). Relevant here is Torgovnick's insight into the way in which Westerners process images of "primitives," their tropes functioning to coopt non-Western others represented thereby as possessing no value in and of themselves and must be controlled through the West's instruments of authority whether these be its language, musket, religion, or art.

Interpreting the colonialist narrative thus as a sinister usurpation of divine authority, Joan Dayan detects in its presumption on mastery a possessive power she contrasts with the possessing spirit of the Haitian *loa*. Creator of zombies, the former, she notes, robs the persons they abduct of vital essence. The plantation was a zone of psycho-spiritual prostration engineered to deny colonized persons their rights as full human beings. It was an underworld, abduction to which meant transition to a de-souled Jean Zombi, personification of death. In Dahomean legend, Dayan explains, "zombies were beings without souls, 'whose death was not real but resulted from the machinations of sorcerers'"; accordingly, "the zombi tells the story of colonization" (36-37).

Rochester appears as such a sorcerer who, on the weight of his colonialist and sexist authority, as Antoinette comes to discover, operates in a shady boundary between the creator god of Genesis, assuming power to grant life through logos, and Pluto, the Greek god of the underworld who abducts Persephone to his realm of death. It is this realm, where bodies are brutalized, in Dayan's words, that becomes what Antoinette sees as a source of paradox. The colonialist venture in the region, which describes itself as genesis of life, functions effectively as ritual of an end its agents enact through prodigiously transformative acts of violence. Rochester is a neocolonial master, arrogating the Cowperian lordship of all he surveys, an authority that carries the right to grant or deny life to his abducted subject. Rhys' text restages a chapter in Western imperialist history to underline the centrist arrogance that molds itself into a conversion, that is, zombifying, narrative. It becomes, effectively, a narrative that plots a tragic drama of equivocal exchanges, transgressions, and reversals to lead her heroine to a dark underworld, arena of amnesia and ultimately death.

Such cooptive language rituals, the dialogic enterprise of imperialist "bad press," can be traced from the twenty-first century Haitian experience back to Hispaniola in the eighteenth century, helping us understand how much has changed, yet how much has also stubbornly resisted change. While the island's name and the coercive powers have changed, the fact that the island remains ground on which imperialists ritualize perverse dramas of abduction gives occasion for pause, such hegemonic politics apparently immune to the ideal of enlightened humanism. A look back at the eighteenth century example can offer a glimpse into the tenaciously seductive appeal of language as a form of the West's ideological (or centrist) thrust.

Imperialist dominance has consistently been foisted upon frames of moral expectation as distorted as Frenchman's Jules Harmon's inability to distinguish terrorism from ethical principle: "The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority.

Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity. Material power is nothing but a means to that end” (qtd. in Said, p. 17). Notions of cultural superiority are here adduced to sanction economic and political interests in shattering foreign cultures, denying human dignity to other people, and glorifying brutal genocide. Charles Darwin’s biological imperative ratifies human slaughter; and butchery, rewritten as conquest, is codified metaphysically.⁹ This is a mythopoeic transmutation, into moral law, of what Malcolm Cowley (1968) calls “the apparently inexhaustible capacity for greed and numbness of heart and the infliction of suffering that survives in the nature of man” (p. xiv), or of what Frantz Fanon (1952/1967) considers a pathological effusion of the shameful “bankruptcy of man” (p. 99).

Joseph Conrad’s (1899/1995) *Heart of Darkness* probes this gulf between colonizer’s vainglorious myths and colonized reality. Allegorizing the moral astigmatism that confounds the imperialist arrogance, the accountant Marlow encounters at the literal as well as symbolic outer station epitomizes the devastating self-contradiction regarding the West’s boast of its superior human and ethical standards. The clerk’s immaculately “starved collars” (a display of “civilized” decency) are at odds with his official role in servicing brutal rape and human demoralization (p. 36). Here the Westerner’s immersion in the alien and alienating African interior (implicitly also a Freudian struggle with repressed elements of self) evinces truths that disturb his faith in his enlightened (a term made synonymous with “superior”) nature. Indeed, Kurtz’s “horror” speaks recognition of shocking neuroses, of a perverse inner darkness that the self-styled champions of “enlightened” progress had stubbornly refused to admit to themselves.

Western historians’ primitivist tropes, in other words, chronicle their behavior as “biased filters,” and chart the centrist premises by which imperialists orchestrated violent contact with Others. Thus the act of investigating the West’s projection of its own culture as *the* universal standard unveils a postcolonial desire to revise evident categories of representation that sponsor virulent forms of xenophobia. Such revision is correlated to the task of deconstructing privileged images of self that, as Gayatri Spivak (1976) observes, involves unveiling rhetorical contradictions, and catching at the self-transgressions informing our metaphors (p. lxxv). Demystifying the authority granted colonialist symbols to mobilize distorting visions of Others and to defend the rightness of the West’s civilizing mission, this review targets imperialist notions that understand and apply language not as arbitrary, ideological sign but as a restrictive or essentializing code. Such closure informs *A History of the West Indies*, by British historian Thomas Coke (1808/1971). Coke’s narrative situates the West as the referential point of normativeness and authorizes its projection of “primitivism” (a vision of devalued Other) upon the Caribbean space.

To realize open-ended and liberating concepts of knowledge this critique turns to the radical dialectic underscored by studies in anthropology and social psychology. These disciplines highlight cognitive processes that influence the acquisition of knowledge and clarify how values are subjectively normalized. Its scope the “multilayeredness of reality,” the epistemology of anthropology, for instance, is a useful methodology for signaling the inherently valid principles, value systems and behavioral patterns upon which different human societies are constituted (Preiswerk and Perrot, p. 22). Accordingly, Clifford Geertz (1973) promotes culture as “symbolic act”; acknowledging that human creations are transmitted and understood socially within groups, his “thick description” stresses the authenticity of our different cultures (p. 14).

Geertz’s ethnological formula invites dialogical engagement of alien ontological frameworks. Such conceptual accommodation, social psychologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) call “crystallizing of the other in consciousness” (p. 133). Capable of targeting mental processes leading to distortion in research, this intersubjective methodology can liberate historical discourse from one-dimensional concepts of civilization. The authority that privileges civilization as the exclusive conduct of people in the West may then be readily recognized and productively demystified. Challenged thus may be *A History’s* recourse to “centration, valorization, [and] projection”—categories through which researchers seeking knowledge of other cultures, impose their affective life, complexes, anxieties, impulses, and sympathies on unfamiliar objects (Preiswerk and Perrot, p. xvi-xvii).

Intercultural transfers are driven, social psychologists note, by the cognitive apparatus, which is not a passive register of objective data but plays an active role in determining “reality.” Individuals incorporate the underlying ideologies of their social groups, David Hamlyn (1982) posits, since social context produces the formative influences responsible for determining “the force of a norm” (p. 31).

This sociogenetic influence on the acquisition of knowledge, crucial also to Fredrick Jameson's (1981) theory on the "political unconscious," explains our inclinations to channel concepts and judgments through our traditions and impose our mental habits and *a priori* cognitive and affective categories on our perceptions (p. 78).

That the criteria for truth and falsity of judgments are socially derived has implications regarding the relative force of the norms we apply to different societies. Hence, Western tropes of light/ darkness, culture/ savagery, civilization/ primitivism, Christian/ heathen functioned to invalidate non-Western patterns of human activity. Each of these binaries is infected by a noxious contingent to be excised, colonialists decide, via acts of Christianizing, civilizing, and humanizing. Suspicious of such language that, in colonialist contexts, is conceived as a form of power and disseminates effects of that power, Torgovnick exposes a troubling underside of the binaries whereby Europeans center themselves as controlling subjects: The "Western half of the comparison belittles, overwhelms or obliterates the non-Western [. . .]. The tropes and categories through which we view primitive societies draw lines and establish relations of power between us and them, even as they presuppose that they mirror us" (p. 11).

Thus to deconstruct Coke's monologic protocol is to target the cultural relativity of language. Appearing to build an argument against harmful prejudices, Coke remarks: "To form a proper estimate of men we must not lose sight of their *real condition*. Without taking this into account, our calculations will be unfounded, and our conclusions must be wrong. To estimate the natives of Hispaniola by the standard of Europe, will never lead us to appreciate with justice their intellectual powers" (p. 99). Coke is not interested in fair-mindedness, however. Ascribing universal value to "mono-cultural" tropes, he promotes what anthropologists call a "most powerful source of bad faith" (Geertz, p. 20). He invokes the "standard of Europe" to eschew comparisons, for comparison come dangerously close to admitting natives he deems inferior onto the hallowed ground of humanity. Lest he might shake the foundations of proper and accepted belief, he cautions diligence in preserving the natural and reassuring divide separating civilization from savagery.

The concept of "improper ground" typifies Coke's inclination to transpose, even metamorphose, subjective ideals into the shape of revealed truth meant to legitimize Europe's high cultural enterprise. At the heart of the metaphors the historian arbitrarily assigns authority to demonize others is a projective mode of thinking that assumes the force of a powerful myth. Others, thus categorized as human aberrations, must be brought under Europe's codified verbal and social ("civilized") order. The fundamental incongruities in the matrix of conceptions informing Coke's study are effects, therefore, of a privileged self-centeredness that generates structures of repressive power. These structures are coextensive with patterns Preiswerk and Perrot define: Self-defense, Operationality, and Proselytizing—processes that effectively reduce and oversimplify Caribbean culture at the level of social cognition.

Rhetoric of Self-Defense

Coke concludes that the West is the only authentic social space. In that it discloses no phenomena pertaining to Western models of society (concepts of government and laws, for example), the Caribbean, he says, lacks organization. Remarkably, the historical details cancel out these supposed lacunae. Those Coke judges "a savage people [. . .] without government, [and] without laws" elected chiefs whom they exalted and honored. Each extended family unit formed a rather autonomous "republic, distinct in some degree from the rest of the nation," with the "chief or patriarch" at the center of each "hamlet" (p. 160). These villages groupings are constituted, he contends, tendentiously, on "a degree of savage friendship" (p. 160); that is, by not imitating European models, they don't qualify as worthy social or political structures.

In so disqualifying alternative cultural forms and the authority of the native group's experience, Coke confirms the centrist structure of values within which he himself is imprisoned: "[The Caribs] estimated all mankind by that standard which measured themselves," is Coke's diagnosis. Then comes his prognosis, "We only recede from this decision as our minds become enlightened; and we correct our judgments as our knowledge becomes enlarged" (p. 158). Identified with European Enlightenment views of the world, this notion of mind-enlargement voices a profound paradox. While conjuring the weight of his *a priori* claims to civilization, Coke proscribes the Caribs for advocating the benefits of their own social organization.

Loath to admit that autonomous practices and values define different civilizations, the historian declares Amerindian communities “without records” even while he speaks of stories, songs and dances that functioned to transmit details of heroic deeds and failures (pp. 152, 161). Clearly, the facts of history are not confined to written records. Non-literate cultures used tales, legends, myths, and songs as vital transmitters of deeds of the past. Coke, though, disqualifies oral forms as media for cultural information in light of European symbols that regard culture as the performance of literacy only. This prescription serves greatly to boost the impression of the abnormality of Amerindian peoples, who, without a sense of history, languish in a perpetual vacuum of experience. Progress supposes a history and without such, these groups wallow in cultural dissolution and spiritual stagnation. To embellish this fantasy of others’ innate depravity, Coke contrasts Western music (“amusements which are established in civilized countries”) with Amerindian performances (“boisterous revels which are found in a savage state,” which are, he adds, “distinct emanations from the [. . .] innate activity of the soul”) (p. 162). Self-centered terminological differentiation of this sort glorifies European actions while deprecating similar behaviors among others.

This mythic self-defense transmutes a series of “false homologies” into an existential phenomenology that reduces civilization to positively valorized institutions, behaviors and accomplishments associated with the West. The evolutionist ethic underwriting Coke’s notion of Europe as prototype of civilization falsely assumes that Amerindians are in a state of arrested development which they can escape only by evolving in the direction of Western culture: “[H]ad their faculties been properly cultivated, had their minds been enlightened, and had proper methods been taken with them to train them gradually to discipline and order, they would not have appeared in such a despicable light, as the pride of those who view them with contempt would persuade us to believe” (p. 177).

vi

This false universal myth (Fox, p. 1) accounts too for Coke’s declaration that Europeans are “unbiased by prejudices.” It is by “opening intercourse with distant regions, *we* [italics added] [. . .] have an opportunity of estimating the extent and diversity of the human intellect, in all its progressive stages of improvement, from perfect barbarism to mere civilization, and from mere civilization to the exalted refinements of polished life” (pp. 17-18). This view of the historian as detached observer outside society and even outside history subscribes to what Geertz calls “the cognitivist fallacy” (p. 12). Disregarding Others and “the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs,” the researcher assumes that cognition “works the same among them as it does among us” (Geertz, p. 13).

This proclaimed belief in the power of his own neutral observation does not hide the fact that Coke’s *we* refers to the particular social group he considers normative and empowered—white, literate, middle class. His bias is deeply couched in the sociocentrism, or class snobbery, that factors into his projections, or displaced fantasies: “The [Caribs] were all peasantry. Nay, they were very much beneath. They had no examples from any higher orders, either to prompt them to diligence in researches, or to instruct them by superior conduct, how to love truth, justice, and virtue” (p. 178). To privilege postmodernism as philosophical attitude, these truths according to Coke can no longer be regarded as “absolute but rather the fruits of rude manipulations” (Rojo, p. 151). To the extent, therefore, that *A History* projects Western culture as truth and legitimates Western values as preemptory metaphysical or eschatological categories, such rhetoric ought to be demystified. Rojo further theorizes the underlying principle of this critique: “Within postmodernity there cannot be any single truth, but instead there are many practical and momentary ones, truths inherit beginnings or ends, local truths, displaced truths, provisional and preemptory truths of a pragmatic nature” (151).

The manipulative design or subjectivity positioning Coke’s narrative is clear. The activity he describes as “intercourse with” is conquest, a euphemism masking acts of ethnocide. Generally, Coke’s xenophobia sheds its camouflage, declaring native groups, for example, “the total and universal depravity of mankind” (p. 124). Confirming his confusion of cognitive and affective dimensions of knowledge, the historian parades myths as truths to control the fates of those he thereby subjectifies: “[I]t is much to be feared that [the Appalacians] were not confined within the bounds of natural criminality; but of this we have not direct evidence” (p. 123). Enslavement and extermination logically follow such presumption.^{vii} Without compunction, therefore, Coke is able to declare the butchery of the Indians Divinely sanctioned, submitting that the Spaniards “might have been the rod of [God’s] anger” against these “idolotrous and licentious” peoples. “Were it not for the bloody deeds of the invaders,” he adds, “the pestilence or earthquake might have accomplished the work of the sword” (p. 124). Born of the historian’s self-validating imagination, this deterministic metaphysic consecrates villainous intolerance, confuting Coke’s claims to empathetic understanding.

A History's agenda is to impose superior cultural values upon supposedly defective, exploitable, and expendable groups of people. Prescriptive notions of civilization thus become agency of abusive power; such ideological closure disregards the possibility that the achievements of different peoples ought to be assessed in the framework of their cultural histories. Touting an illusion of accursed Otherness, Coke's rhetoric binds human identity and variety within the prison house of imperialist myopia to lock up all the functions of the Other's soul. Coke too endorses the hegemonic ideological premise the Spanish settlers had adopted to entrench their empire and that found ultimate expression in inhuman butchery. From the vantage point that the Indians were without the capacity for rational action or social progress, economic exploitation and physical abuse were rationalized, and enslavement and slaughter morally dignified. The Europeans saw but nature's freaks who, in failing to develop, had reached a point of helplessness and could not be left to themselves. They would never learn to do better and would simply impede civilized progress.

Thus, while boasting supreme ethical authority, imperialists orchestrated campaigns of monstrous evil. Claiming, for example, to confer civilization's blessings on subhuman groups, the Spaniards refused to be restrained (to Coke's own horror) by physical, legal, or moral limits. Coke chronicles the outrageous genocide of colonists, who would "burn or hang thirteen Indians every morning for a given time, as a token of devotional gratitude to God," or as "honorary compliment" to Jesus and his apostles. These champions of "progress" would hunt escapees by bloodhounds, forcibly baptize the captives, and cut their throats "to prevent apostasy from that religion into which they had been so cruelly initiated" (p. 129).

While Coke censures these designs to reform the Indians by the power of the sword, his word mandates his own charter to a Procrustean complex. Measuring the Indians by exogenous criteria and concepts, his history perpetrates a mode of distortion analogous to the reductive abuses whereby the mythic giant Procrustes imposed his standard of a human ideal upon all strangers. Paul Diel (1980) cogently psychoanalyzes the Greek myth. The forest Procrustes inhabits, Diel suggests, is a "symbol of the unconscious." The reshaping operation the giant performs on his captives "symbolizes banalization, reduction of the soul to conventional standards" (p. 104). The deforming complex implicit in the giant's ruthless self-idealization finds a parallel in Coke's narrative that, like the myth, typifies normative designs defined by self-legitimizing fantasies.^{viii} Endorsing a Procrustean standard of unalterable distinctions between normal and abnormal, Coke's rhetoric underwrites an aggressive and questionable intent to compel conformity.

Moral and ideological figurations in *A History* need, therefore, to be called into question, for subjective valuations are paraded as evidence of objective reality. Such constructions function to privilege moot claims of the superiority of one mode of life over another and, so, to erase others' cultural individuality. Assimilation of Western-style materialism and technology is foisted upon others to complete the tragic violation of their sovereignty and further to encourage them to see themselves as second-rate copies of, and dependents on, the West. In more recent historical example, an Iraqi, who favors his son's continuing an age-old farming tradition, is mesmerized by the great wonder a journalist conjures of the farmer's son bowing down before a new American machine: a computer.

She advocated their dependence on the imported technology rather than the family's continuing the self-sustaining tradition whereby they eked a living out of their own soil (Osgood). Even more blatantly, we invoke our myths to sanction violent oppression of those who are different. An American General (William Boykin) thumps his chest and lets fly the battle-cry for a modern holy crusade. His chauvinistic boast, that the Christian God is "bigger" than Allah, challenges, moreover, the humanism that grounds Keith H. Basso's (1997) anthropological insight: "Making sense of other people is never easy, and making sense of how other people make sense can be very difficult indeed. But . . . it is something that must be done, especially when the welfare of whole societies may be at stake" (p. 3).

Idealizing one's culture, that is, does not justify war on "human variety and freedom." Yet Europe's self-fashioning is incomplete, Coke seems to believe, unless it is further foiled against the derogatory tropes that dominate the hasty and reductionist interpretations he offers to speak in favor of the Indians. While declaring the Appalachians inoffensive, hospitable, benevolent, and unsuspecting, he adds that they acted "with a frankness and generosity rarely observable in savage life" (p. 93). Native peoples eschewed Western-style avarice, Coke discloses, then attributes such merit to cognitive and cultural defects.

Their disinclination to greed meant that the "inconveniences of their situation were concealed from their understandings, because they were unable to compare their condition with that of other countries, the situation of whose inhabitants was preferable to their own" (p. 99). Back-handed compliments of this nature, like the outright disparagements, reject the Indians' right to an autonomous mode of existence.

"In the gentleness of their manners and the amiableness of their disposition," Coke declares, "[the Apalachians] more than compensated for [their] intellectual vacancy" (p. 100). As if he dared not let an apparent compliment stand unqualified, Coke adds that theirs was "a degree of refinement which savage life but rarely exhibits." The historian is pursuing, here, moreover, a pseudo-phrenological thesis meant to impeach the Amerindians for not looking like Western intellectuals. This bias comes from a failure to acknowledge that values in different civilizations are founded on independently determined criteria.

It is in Europe, only, Coke assumes, that the Indians might have escaped incompleteness. He suggests that the surprisingly exemplary qualities of the natives are mirages. They lacked "refinement," he explains, because their "solitary abodes" provided them but "few opportunities of acquiring knowledge" (p. 98-99). In building a large cabin "undoubtedly [. . .] to relieve his mind from the horrors of vacancy and to improve himself and countrymen in those practices which originated in the improper direction of the native vigor of his soul" (p. 162), the Amerindian recognized his retardation, Coke believes, but was confounded on how to relieve the affliction. Without sensitive awareness of how others' "practices for organizing and interpreting social experience differ from our own" (Basso, p. 5), we authorize such misrepresentations.

No one group monopolizes the capacity for intelligence; different people conceptualize their experiences in different ways. Thus observations of behaviors in one culture can be distorted by the use of concepts researchers suppose are common cultural traits. Coke's appeal to rationality as *the* ideal type of behavior that Enlightenment thinkers promote following Rene Descartes (1596-1650) projects the Indians as the West's untamed self, its id forces, the irrational, defective, and dangerous element Westerners boast of having controlled by their restraining influence of reason. While rationality may be conceptualized in non-teleological terms to legitimate the ways individuals in diverse societies use their resources to survive, Coke's fixation on Otherness overlooks the basic assumptions whereby the Indians meaningfully arranged their lives: their social and political structures, their abstract principles of logic and morality. Certainly, the cultural forms are different, but this difference Coke mistakenly attributes to the principles of intelligence involved in structuring the different societies.

We know that Coke was writing at a time when Europeans adjudged their habits, beliefs as well as mental predispositions the *sine qua non* of human "civilization." Knowing the root of a problem should not dispose us to condoning the error, however, unless we aim to perpetuate the harm. Coke's satirizing and inferiorizing characterizations assign the West the only significant form of life, and declare that he, its representative, is at liberty to foist his fantasies upon a backward place and its people, without history, culture, integrity, or independence worth respecting by the West. Charged with the exuberant narcissism that accompanied European expansionist ideals, his historical judgments place the Amerindians outside the supposed humanizing attributes of style, technology, and logic.

Operationality

The institutions and values making up the facets of production and consumption vary enormously across regions. Yet Coke assigns progress a materialist emphasis and reserves the term "civilization" for societies whose agendas prioritize business foresight. To accord capitalist behavior paramount ontological status is to sponsor Europe's enlightened greatness. Since the universal human enterprise is significantly manifested in processes of economic life, colonialism is not an exploitative undertaking underwritten by self-interests but a noble pursuit of trade, indispensable to human progress: "Commercial advantages are, without all doubt, intimately connected with the policy of nations; but the internal action of that policy supposes the previous civilization of the subject. It is only civilization that can render policy beneficial" (p. 21).

Disregarding the social contradictions between West and non-West, Coke misapplies capitalist structures and values to the hunter-gatherer economy. Commensurately, he inveighs against the Apalachians' "aversion to labour" and "mode of indolent profligacy" (p. 96). He says that they "cast no thoughts into futurity about the welfare of their offspring.

Their time was spent in sleep, or in dancing and other diversions; and they seemed to consider pleasure as the chief end of their being" (p. 96). Scorning social forms not dictated by Western conceptions of time, productivity, emphasis on material goods, family structure, or relations with nature, Coke indicts the Indians. Yet the conduct he codifies as familial aberrations and social irresponsibility cannot be adequately represented according to the ideology he adduces. Phenomena that appear common do not carry the same subjective valuations in both cultures.

This "invidious transfer of illusions [and] beliefs" underwrites Coke's derogation of the Caribs also: "Without being compelled to the toilsome labours of cultivation, they constantly found in their forests a wholesome vegetable food suited to their constitutions, and which required little or no care in preparing it" (p. 163). This conception of work as compulsion conveys the passion for profit exalted through Calvinist doctrines on the dignity of labor. Calvinism bequeathed to European society faith in capitalist enterprise as a program of economic action and a religious undertaking. Material gain was extolled through the virtues of hard work when sixteenth century Protestant ideals, in harmony with the demands of social and economic change, made untiring husbandry of God's natural gifts paramount among human ethical obligations. The eighteenth century English merchant-class, bringing a new emphasis to these religio-economic theories on human progress, made work a condition of life itself. In accordance with Calvinist strictures, Coke declares unremitting toil obligatory, carrying moral value in addition to calculable material reward. He sees the Indians' situation as intolerable; they fail to recognize that labor is the most valuable form of human activity in itself, and the only reliable way of advancing one's spiritual standing in the Divine design.

Work being a religious undertaking, he thinks, failing to cultivate zeal in profit-making results in cultural marginalization and relegation to a secondary ontological status. Truly, however, cultural frameworks determine people's real needs, and behaviors relating to production and consumption are components of a total life-process—each social organization integrated into a functional whole. It is lost upon Coke that one society's perceptions of wealth, poverty, thrift, indolence, security or comfort may differ from similar standards of value among other groups. Accentuating the future and envisioning work as compulsion, he promotes the absoluteness of Western ontology and economic theories. This extrinsic authority translates the Indians' disinterest in exploiting the earth into evidence of their crimes against God and nature.

Not everyone accepts an ideology of ascetic Puritanism as a valid life principle; nor do all people regard the land and its inhabitants, primarily, as potential resource for profit. In dignifying labor as moral dogma and social obligation, Coke systemizes Others' behavior according to a purely contingent aspect of human experience. He detects, moreover, no ethical contradiction between his panegyric of material self-interest, and its implied promotion of ethnocide, even genocide. His socially organizing principle, the ethical value of labor, proscribes the Indians as morally deficient. Their disinclination to turn raw materials into profit, moreover, translates into the right of the possessors of progressive economic theories to appropriate these resources and exploit the people themselves as mere commodity value. Coke endorses the "progress" the Spaniard made by enslaving the Indians in order to refine them and save their souls (186). This questionable act of grace required depriving the natives of their "excessive liberty" and assigning them profitable work, illustrated by their being brutally forced to mine gold and cultivate the ground to feed their tormentors.

Remarkably, Coke understood the inhumanity legalized by the *encomienda* system of 1503, an occasion, he says, for greed and religious fanaticism to join hands in Spanish crusades of carnage: "To cut the throats of the natives was to entitle the murderers to the treasures which they could plunder. [. . .] To strike off the head of an Indian at one blow, was an act of expertness which frequently produced a rival" (pp. 127-28). Enslaved Indians were beaten or starved to death. Women were forcibly separated from the men and from helpless babies that the Spaniards left to die. Desperate fugitives were hunted and fed to dogs. Fifty years of this ruthlessness annihilated the entire native population of Hispaniola: over one million two hundred thousand lives.

Such devastation was a product of myths inherited also by Cecil Rhodes, a passionate champion of the codes that underwrote Europe's "historical blueprint" for ruthless imperialism:

I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings. [. . .] Why should we not form a secret society with but one object the [. . .] bringing of the whole uncivilized world under British rule. [. . .] I think that we all think that poverty is better under our flag than wealth under a foreign one. [. . .] It is our duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and [. . .] more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race more of the best the most human, most honourable race this world possesses. (pp. 248-50)

In boasting of itself as acme of enlightened moral orthodoxy, the West alchemized into virtue the base instinct of greed and the moral perversity of racism. Consequently, materialism was glorified as ideal social code and malevolence confused with ethics.

Proselytizing

Coke's proselytizing most fervently submits *A History's* authenticating function—normalizing the West and so justifying its control of other societies. Assigning Christianity religious patent, Coke invalidates the Indian cosmogony and ponders the natives' omission from the divine schedule: their being permitted, "for reasons inscrutable to us, to wander in a state of intolerable darkness, while we have been favored with the light of the glorious gospel" (p. 175). Whatever the reason, Coke locates it in some fatal deficiency of the Other's debased nature. The Indian, he says, is at the mercy of blind, maleficent forces that are "only faint resemblances of the more hideous images of his mind" (pp. 114-115).

A History's crusading rhetoric thus propagates the abusive energy that drove Western conquest: "No scheme of religion," Coke offers, "strikes closely to the root of the most favorite vices of mankind, like the Christian" (p. 155). Historical truth thus yields to the exercise of power and implicates Christian evangelism in coercive campaigns to corral others as satellites of the West: "[W]hen we consider the great advantages which infinite compassion has afforded us, and the impenetrable shadows which hover over a savage dispensation, it should enlarge our bowels of compassion toward them, and induce us to use our utmost exertions to spread among heathen nations, the light of that gospel which we enjoy" (pp. 175-76). These Christian/heathen binaries draw rigid boundaries between the self as normal and the Other as abnormal, privileging, thereby, the pernicious figurations Westerners had invoked to slaughter millions. Violent assaults were inevitable given such rampant centrism, for the mere presence of Otherness threatened the fixed poles of beliefs and values whereupon the West premised its human and cultural orthodoxy and authorized its universal dominance.

Coke's self-justifying agenda crowds out adequate sociological or mental representations of the groups under study. Divorcing the Indians from the context in which they live, act, and make sense of the world, his narrative reduces the world's shifting array of signifiers to a single set of indices. Essentially, he recomposes history, nature, and humanity as ideological absolutes, or affirms contingent and specific cultural signs as the standard for human participation in the world. Herein, a system of metaphors metamorphoses from a cultural methodology to a way of thinking, or a metaphysic, systematizing the universe on exclusivist terms.

His mind closed to possibilities of a worthy life or belief system outside Europe's metaphysical schemes, Coke invokes ideological as well as ontological absolutes as a basis for removing the Carib from the human race entirely: "We behold in him, human nature sunk to the lowest state of degradation. He appears in this view uniting with tigers and hyenas of the desert; or influenced by a species of barbarity to which the shaggy inhabitants of the forest are strangers" (p. 157).^{ix} The myth of Western man as human prototype governs, too, Coke's vilification of African slaves. Enslavement, Coke proposes, elevates Africans from "vices of the most odious nature" and from "little more than mere animal sensations" (p. 26).^x Evidently, physical and cultural difference amounts to a "spiritual and moral otherness that only slavery could turn to some productive account" (Gates and McKay, p. 156), a disingenuousness Ngugi WaThiong'o (1986) finds disturbing: "The African is not part of humanity. Only slavery to Europe can raise him, possibly, to the lower ranks of humanity. Slavery is good for the African" (p. 32).

In Basso's phrase, these tendentious constructs represent the Other as "an abstraction" (p. 4), a simplified and expedient set "of ideas and values, a little system of 'taken-for-granted typifications and relevances.'" To degrade Others is to structure the identity of the West in accordance with self-flattering binaries that justify takeover.

Coke's rationale for demonizing others is quite obvious. They simply are not like Europeans in appearance, nor in categories of social or cultural praxis. The binary array of civilized/savage, man/beast, Christian/heathen "contrast conceptions"^{xi} structuring *A History* and underwriting Coke's intellectual and moral entitlement, tautologically double back, however, to destabilize this authority. Units in the figuration of a devastating myth, these formulations portray the historian as a variation of the ruthless shaping Greek God. The exclusivist epistemological and ontological codes governing his conduct toward others declare him a disfiguring presence rejecting others' rights to personhood.

Conclusion

Overlooking the fact that all societies function according to systems of organization based on defined rules, traditions, and values, Coke's narrative is fraught with fundamental axiological problems regarding the Caribbean "reality." The exogenous tropes, in Torgovnick's phrase, "take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and subordinatable" (p. 21).

An alternative dialectic, one aimed at an open approach to history, Geertz explains, must recognize that any attempt to cast ethnological research "in terms other than its own is regarded as a travesty—as the anthropologist's severest term of moral abuse, ethnocentric" (p. 24). The intersubjective protocol informing social theory, we ought to stress, helps validate historical analysis in that it alerts us to the devaluative figurations likely to invade our research, encourages us to tune into Others' inner lives, and fosters resistance to the "false universals" whereby we fetishize our own cultures and desensitize our humanity. As such a guide for arriving at liberating forms of historical discourse, the epistemology of anthropology provides apt critique for shattering the security of simplistic and sterile dualities informing not only Coke's *A History* but also the judgments that are so often bandied about in the public arena by smug and uninformed media personnel.

References

- Basso, Keith H. (1997) *Portraits of the Whiteman: Linguistic play and cultural symbols among the Western Apache*. New York: Cambridge UP. Print.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise on the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Doubleday. Print.
- Bunche, Ralph, J. Conceptions and ideologies of the negro problem. *Contributions in black studies*, 9-10 (1990-1992): 70-114. Print.
- Chagnon, Napoleon A. Yanomamo, the true people. In *National geographic*. 150 (August 1976): 211-223. Print.
- Coke, Thomas (1971). *A history of the West Indies*. Vol. 1. London: Cass Series. (Original work published 1808). Print.
- Conrad, Joseph (1995). *Heart of darkness*. London: Penguin. (Original work published 1899). Print.
- Cowley, Malcolm (1968). Introduction. *A history of the Atlantic slave trade: Black cargoes*. Daniel P. Mannix. New York: Vintage Press. Print.
- Dayan, Joan (1995). *Haiti, history, and the gods*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Print.
- Diel, Paul (1980). *Symbolism in Greek mythology: Human desire and its transformations*. London: Shambhala. Print.
- Fanon, Franz (1967). *Black skin, White masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove. (Original work published 1952). Print.
- Fox, Robert Elliot (1987). *Conscientious sorcerers: The Black postmodernist fiction of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany*. New York: Greenwood. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and McKay Nellie Y. (Eds.). (2004). *The Norton anthology of African American literature* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton. Print.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Harper Collins. Print.

- Griffith, Paul A. (2010). *Afro-Caribbean poetry and ritual*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan. Print.
- Hamlyn, David (1982). What exactly is social about the origins of understanding. In George Butterworth and Paul Light. (Eds.), *Social cognition: Studies in the development of understanding* (17-31). Chicago: U of Chicago Press. Print
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm F. (1952). *The philosophy of right and the philosophy of history*. In Robert Maynard Hutchins. (Ed.). Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica. Print.
- Highwater, Jamake (1991). *Myth and sexuality*. New York: Meridian. Print
- Jameson, Fredrick (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP. Print
- - - (1991). *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP. Print
- Jenson, Deborah (2005). "From the kidnapping of the Louvertures to the alleged kidnapping of Aristide: Legacies of slavery in the post/colonial world." *Yale French studies*, 107, 162-86. Print
- Kershner, R. B. (1997). *The twentieth century novel: An introduction*. Boston: Bedford Books. Print
- Lafay, Howard (1962). Easter Island and its mysterious monuments. In *National Geographic*, 121, 90-117. Print
- Lawless, Robert (1992). *Haiti's bad press*. Rochester: Schenkman Books. Print.
- Mannix, Daniel P. (1965). *A history of the Atlantic slave trade: Black cargoes*. New York: Vintage Press. Print.
- Osgood, Charles (August 1, 2004). *The CBS Sunday morning show*.
- Preiswerk, Roy and Dominique Perrot (1978). *Ethnocentrism and History: Africa, Asia and Indian America in Western textbooks*. New York: Nok. Print.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1992). New York: W.W. Norton. (Original work published 1966). Print.
- Rhodes, Cecil (1974). Confession of faith. In John Flint *Cecil Rhodes* (pp. 248-252). Boston: Little, Brown and Company. Print.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1981). The narrative function. In John B. Thompson (Ed. and Trans.) *Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language and interpretation* (pp. 274-96). Cambridge: Cambridge UP. Print.
- Rojo, Antonio Benitez (1992). *The repeating island: The Caribbean, the postmodern perspective* (James Maraniss, Trans). Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print.
- Said, Edward W (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage. Print.
- - - (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon. Print.
- Sarap, Madan (1989). *An introductory guide to post-structuralism and postmodernism*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press. Print.
- Shakespeare, William (1975). *The tempest. The complete works of William Shakespeare*. New York: Avenel Books. (Original work published 1611). Print.
- Singh, Raghubir (1975). The last Andaman Islanders. In *National Geographic*, 148, 66-91. Print
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1976). Translator's preface. In Jacques Derrida *Of grammatology* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Print.
- Torgovnick, Mariana (1990). *Gone primitive: Savage intellects, modern lives*. Chicago: Chicago UP. Print.
- WaThiong'o, Ngugi (1986). *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Nairobi: Heinemann. Print
-

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Implicating himself in the internationalization of Eurocentric myths, Georg W. F. Hegel (1952) pronounces sub-Saharan Africa "no historical part of the world" (p. 196). David Hume claims that all other races are "naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation." Immanuel Kant too declares all other races bankrupt of arts, sciences, or any single "praiseworthy quality" (qtd. in Gates and McKay [2004], p. xl).

ⁱⁱ Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot (1978) scrutinize the self-centered conceptualizing in Western history, whose "rules and concepts" "limit its ability to portray what men of all cultures and all ages have done so far," and, instead, "assert the anhistoricity of [preliterate] cultures." "History, as it is taught to us," Preiswerk and Perrot remark, "is essentially the history of the West, with appendices referring to other peoples" (p. xxi).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rudyard Kipling's (1989) "The White Man's Burden" encourages ethnocentrism—one group's behavior toward others defined by its privileged image of itself (Preiswerk and Perrot, xxiii); the poem asks Westerners to steer "toward the light" "sullen peoples, / Half devil and half-child." Kipling's "A Song of the English" (1893) also exalts ethnocide as glorified ideal: "Came the Whisper, came the Vision, . . . / Till the Soul that is not man's soul was sent us to lead." This apotheosizing of narcissism was indicted by Joseph Conrad's (1899/1995) Marlow as the West's propensity to "set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" "belief in the idea" (20).

^{iv} Paul Griffith (2010) points out that Said (1978) explains the self-serving visionary cosmologies that sanctioned imperialist desires to box in "individuals, groups, nations, species, each to its own proper place in the universal pattern. To know the 'cosmic' place of a thing or a person is to say what it is and what it does, and at the same time to say why it should be and do as it is and does. [. . .] The pattern, and it alone, brings into being and causes to pass away and confers purpose, that is to say, value and meaning, on all there is. To understand is to perceive patterns" (*Orientalism* 70). Said pertinently reminds us of the tendency in all cultures to "impose corrections upon new reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge." This conversion is a perfectly natural action of "the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness" (67). This spontaneous adjustment does not defend, however, the problems that imperialist transformations entrench. The receiver translates the benefits he receives into what he believes are benefits for those whose reality his metaphors appropriate and oppress. He constantly aims at converting the Other "from something into something else," as Said notes (Griffith, p. 18).

^v Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903) application of Darwin's idea of natural selection to social conduct was often invoked to defend institutionalized prejudices. Social systems, including capitalism, supposedly "mimicked natural competition," and accordingly, "the 'casualties' . . . should, for the betterment of the species, be 'selected out'" (qtd. in R.B. Kershner, 1997, p. 41).

^{vi} Mariana Torgovnick (1990) recalls that early researchers rejected antievolutionist concepts of cultural relativity for these challenged assumptions of Western superiority; but so-called primitive or "simpler" cultures were later confirmed various and complete, though different from Western practices (p. 19).

^{vii} Ethnocentric evaluations accounted for the inhuman acts Howard Lafay (1962) recalls: "To many a smiling island of Polynesia, discovery brought not civilization but tragedy" (p. 93). On Easter Sunday 1722, Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen wantonly gunned down Rapa Nui natives. The next 140 years "brought violence, disease, and death to Rapa Nui." Enslavement in 1862 was the "death blow." Raghubir Singh (1975) too reveals that the Andaman islanders, called murderous savages and cannibals, were actually "frightened victims" whose lives and culture were ravaged by Europeans' cruelty (pp. 68-70).

^{viii} This theory of the psychic phenomena, Paul Diel (1980) terms "banalization," serves to illuminate Coke's *A History*. The giant fights not only against accidental external dangers but also against an inner evil that arrests or retards the essential need of evolution. Resisting the call to evolve intellectually, and seeking to reduce novel data to fit into his *a priori* schemes of knowledge, Procrustes embodies psychologically reductive energy. His story underlines the mythical character of human coveted interest in measuring others by erecting the self as absolute guardian of moral destiny (p. x).

^{ix} The irony is constantly lost upon Coke whose prejudices prevent him from evaluating, fairly, the conduct of Europeans and Amerindians. When the Frenchman Du Parquet landed on Grenada intending to massacre the Caribs, he was met with "civility" according to Coke. Instead, therefore, Du Parquet decided to "purchase" the island, though he had no plans to inhabit it, and offered one chief knives, hatchets, beads and two bottles of brandy. Refusing to give away the island resulted in a horrendous massacre of all the people because they were not seen as human (pp. 49-50). Another native chief, Coke also deems a savage, offered moral instruction to the Europeans, namely "that after this life there is another, wherein a different portion is allotted to good and bad men. If therefore you expect to die, and believe with us that everyone is to be rewarded in a future state according to his conduct in the present, you will do no hurt to those who do none to you" (p. 117).

^x Daniel P Mannix (1965), too, finds fault not with the oppressor but with the oppressed. Defiant to death, Amerindians, Mannix thinks, were too primitive to be enslaved; Africans, determined to survive in the face of injustice, he declares innately servile (p. 6).

^{xi} "Contrast conceptions" or "counter-conceptions, conceived in terms of good and evil" is Ralph Bunche's (1990-1992) description of the binaries by which Westerners "interpret human relations," or morally polarize others (p. 76).