

Bird Islands or, Rethinking the Renaissance*

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“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!”

(Caliban, William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
I.2.363-5)

I had lived here “for five years without ever realizing
that Jamaica was just on the other side of my back
wall. Relief flooded me.... Heat prickled the back of
my neck. A bird was cursing in the hedge.”

(Pauline Melville, “The Truth Is in the Clothes.”
Shape-Shifter 111)

There is a forever-repeated factual sighting in travel accounts, histories, geographies, charts and navigational aids of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European expansion, chiefly and at first Atlantic. The sighting is of coastal and ocean islands thronged with birds and eggs on which sailors “refresh” themselves and stock their ships, often to extinction of the avian populations. The repetition is as startling as the ostensive similarity of the islands and behaviors, making its fact into a crucial metaphor.

1. Bird Islands: metaphor and critique of conquest?

On the 21st of the said month of May we left the aforesaid harbor on a west wind and were carried north-north-east from Cape Bonavista to the Isle of Birds, which island was altogether surrounded by a ridge of broken, smashed ice. Despite this, our two barks landed on this island to stock up with birds, whose number is so great as to be unbelievable to

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people who haven't seen them. For despite the island's being about a league around it is so very full of them as to seem as if they had been stuck there [*que on les ayt arimez*]. There are a hundred times more round about and in the air than on the island. Some of these birds are as big as black and white geese, with beaks like a crow's, and they stay in the sea, never able to fly in the air, because they have wings as small as half a hand: with which they fly as strongly in the sea as other birds do in the air. And these birds are extraordinarily fat. We call these birds *apponatz* [Great Auk]. In less than half an hour each of our two barks salted down four or five barrel-loads, as if we were picking up stones, not counting those we could eat fresh (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: John Gerrard Keulemans, *Great Auks* (c. 1900?)

Thus Jacques Cartier (1986: 96) starts his *Relation* of his first official 1534

Newfoundland voyage: “official” because, the report shows, he had visited before. So had many others, on regular fishing trips from certainly before the Genoese Englishman Zuan Caboto reported its no less official 1497 “discovery.” Cartier found the island’s birds “*une chose increable,*” their comestible size and value a “*chosse merveilleuse*” (96). In his 1557 *Singularitez de la France Antarctique* André Thevet said the same of south Atlantic Ascension Island’s teeming birds, not just available to eat but demanding it, flying to the ships, landing on sailors’ hands and tirelessly returning even when shaken or pushed away.

On the island also dwelt the birds “called *Aponars*. They have small wings, and so cannot fly. They are as tall and fat as our herons, with a white breast and back as black as coal, a beak like a cormorant’s or other crow’s. When you kill them they squeal like pigs.” These were the same birds as on Newfoundland’s island, “where is such abundance that once three great French ships going to Canada each filled their boats twice over with the birds of this island’s shore. You had but to land and prod them before you onto the boats to get them aboard like sheep to the slaughter [*ainsi que moutons à la boucherie*].” Ascension shared this abundance: “that’s why I’ve talked so long about them” (1997: 103-4, ch. xxi). Their number and behavior were, he echoed, incredible. He was really enlarging on Ludovico de Varthema who in 1508, ending a five-year journey to India, even perhaps the Moluccas (though scholarship now doubts it; see VARTHEMA, 2004: 25-7), passed Ascension: “where we found birds as big as ducks that settled on the ship and were so stupid and innocent [*bestiale e puri*] as to let themselves be caught by hand. Once caught they seemed harsh and fierce. But before being taken they looked on us as miraculous things. And this was by never having seen Christians before, because on this island was

nothing but fish, water and these birds” (1885: 270).

The English tardily got in on this. Edward Hayes, captaining the *Golden Hind*, wrote of coming on the Newfoundland “Iland named Penguin” on July 30, 1583, as if he had been reading Thevet. It took its name, he said, “of a foule there breeding in abundance, almost incredible, being very large (not much lesse then a goose) and exceeding fat: which the French men use to take without difficulty upon that Iland, and to barrell them up with salt.” They would have done the same, he added, had they not been pressed for time (HAKLUYT, 1926: 6.14). In 1620, Richard Whitbourne repeated how Newfoundland auks “multiply so infinitely, vpon a certain flat Iland, that men drive them from thence vpon a boord, into their boates by hundreds at a time; as if God had made the innocency of so poore a creature, to become such an admirable instrument for the sustenation of man” (9). God and birds were alike complicit in satisfying sailors’ culinary needs. By the time John Gerrard Keulemans painted them at the nineteenth century’s end every *apponat* was gone. In fact, before the artist’s mid-century birth-date the Great Auk was everywhere extinct. Ascension may have lost it long before, for when Augustin de Beaulieu passed in 1622, though fascinated by penguins elsewhere, he reported here only “many birds, that is: frigates, terns [*etrelets*], boobies [*fols*], *margauts* [gannets], gulls and others” (1996: 235).

In 1534 or 1557 Cartier, Thevet and others asserted no new claim. A generation before the first, in 1504, Pedro Reinel had made a map showing European sailors where they could find this island off Newfoundland’s east coast (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: After Pedro Reinel map (1504), detail: Newfoundland with “*y. das faves*” [6th named from top] (Dawson 1905: 57).

His compatriots Miguel and Caspar Corte-Real had been there right after Cabot, if indeed, as is likely, their father João Vaz had not sailed these same waters twenty years earlier, along with Cornish, Breton, Devon, Norman, Basque, Welsh, Galician, Irish and other west-coast European sailors, after fish not discoveries, at the start of the “large-scale fishing of cod” that Braudel puts at “the end of the fifteenth century” (1981-4: 1.216). Stephen Martin has these fishing trips “as early as the middle of the fifteenth century,” though adducing no evidence (2009: 20).

In the 1450s, Gomes Eanes de Zurara had recorded the similarly pillaged Isle of Herons in the Arguim banks off modern Mauritania, as did many others. I study this historian and his West African island in detail elsewhere. Here they hint that Thevet’s

likening of auks to herons was as pointed as his remark about sheep to the slaughter, which fits a rich, allied, symbolic tradition. Meantime, fifteen years before Zurara, Gutierre Díez de Games wrote in his *Victorial* of just such islands, not yet in the Atlantic but off the Mediterranean North African coast of “*Berbería*”:

In these islands are great crowds of birds that breed because of the islands’ soil, doves and vultures, pelicans [*alcatrazes*], gulls, falcons, quails and many other kinds of birds, so many that there were enough to eat for all the ships. These islands are uninhabited, no people live there nor is there any fresh water (1993: 322).

The *Victorial* was published only in 1782, but was well known and cited from its composition around 1435. It tells the story of the travels of don Pero Niño, count of Buelna, but is at once a treatise on chivalry (starting with Solomon and the Alexander mostly of the thirteenth-century *Libro de Alexandre*), a history of Spain during the time of Pedro the Cruel and a biography of Niño as perfect knight. These bird islands, which precede by little Niño’s travels north in the Atlantic, facilitate what Díez offers as a chivalric Christian exploit, so maybe their birds could have been provided by a beneficent God. The chivalry, though, is more than a little dubious.

Directly after the bird eating, Díez writes of their hope for Moorish ships to come by for them to attack. When none did, they debated whether there “was any place on the coast that they could destroy.” There was. Though missing the first town they sought, they found another: “and thanks be to God the Christians conquered, entered stores, striking and

killing the Moors, and so they won,” stealing carpets, cloth, food, jewels and other goods, before coasting to more raids on Moors and returning to Segovia and Tordesillas (a nice prediction!) to be rewarded (326-41, xlviili-li, here 328). Niño then took three sail to France and England whose southwestern ports he ravaged from St. Ives through Dartmouth, Portland, Poole and Southampton to the Isle of Wight. Díez flatly tied the sailors’ killing and eating of the first islands’ birds to their raiding and killing Moors and other unarmed townsfolk. We won’t always meet these islands so graphically even when finally out in the open Atlantic. Some thirty years after Díez, Joanot Martorell’s *Tirant lo blanc* repeated Niño’s Moors’ invasion of southern England, led this time however by a “King of Canary.” We shall see how this weaves tautly into the complex history of my metaphor.

In 1463 Valentim Fernandes told of “Ylhas [o ylha] dos Alcatrazes,” Pelicans’ Island(s), near modern Guinea Bissau’s Bijagós archipelago (FERNANDES, 1952: 10, 11). In 1514, partly after Fernandes or his source, João de Lisboa set them more exactly near the “Ilhas das gallinhas,” Hens’ Islands (PERES, 1952: 52, 54). A little earlier, the great Duarte Pacheco Pereira also noted the “small island called Alcatrazes” (1967: 94): modern Alcatraz Island, says his translator George Kimble (94n4). None of these *roteiros* remarks on their presumed birds, Pacheco just warning of “bad anchorage round it” (94). Silence on flora and fauna was usual in *roteiros*, guides as they were of the sailing itself, but the naming was clearly indicative; so I add that this group also numbered a Parrots’ Island. Of this *archipelago* none wrote of its birds being eaten: a major point since these restaurant bird islands are usually depicted as isolated (an altering of fact hinting at metaphor). Meantime, Eustache Delafosse wrote in his captivity tale (no *roteiro* this) of sailing by

Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands in 1480: “beside fishing we went to relax [*jouer*] on the islands and caught birds not at all afraid of us for they’d never seen and didn’t know what humans were, and so we roasted and ate them. But they tasted overly of henbane, for it’s a place where it grows a lot and the birds eat it” (DELAFOSSÉ, 1897: 188; 1992: 42). *Jouer*, play, recalls Zurara’s and then Fernandes’ use of *folgar*, whose major implications I shall mention later here only in passing.

Venturing ever deeper into Atlantic blue waters mariners continually touched upon such *merveilleuse* restorative bird isles. Sailing from the Cape Verdes to Brazil on a fourth voyage in 1503, Amerigo Vespucci told of finding a small island near where his admiral managed to sink his ship on a submerged rock. The island itself was “uninhabited, and had many fresh and sweet waters, infinite trees, and was full of so many sea and land birds that they were countless; these were so innocent [*simplici*] that they let themselves be taken by hand; and we took so many as to load a boat with these animals” (1951: 262). A year or so later, returning to France from Brazil with two willing Indians (they and theirs already likened to birds), Binot Paulmier de Gonneville fell on this same Fernando de Noronha: an “uninhabited islet, covered with green woods, whence flew out birds in their myriads, so many that a lot perched on the ship’s masts and rigging; and let themselves be caught. And these birds seemed fat with feathers, so once plucked they were of very light fleshiness” (1995: 28). This was “seven or eight days” after several deaths, including those of an Indian and the ship’s priest and – critically in Gonneville’s narrative construction – after studied debates as to whether the Indian should be, should have been, given the baptismal sacrament before his death. Bird islands and sacramental debate were quickly linked.

So Samuel Taylor Coleridge was directly within this symbolism when he assimilated the albatross shot by the protagonist of his celebrated “Ancient Mariner” (1798) to “a Christian soul,” hailing “it in God’s name.” As he was in recording the hellish consequences of its killing: “All in a hot and copper sky / The bloody sun at noon”; temptation of undrinkable water; “Death-fires” that “danc’d at night”; raising further divine appeal: “The very deeps did rot: O Christ!” All the Mariner’s prayers, however, now and later, must remain without effect:

Alone, alone, all all alone
 Alone on the wide wide Sea;
 And Christ would take no pity on
 My soul in agony. (ll. 107-26, 224-7)

No prayer rises, just a “wicked whisper” from a “heart as dry as dust”; useless till his soul bears witness “unaware” (238-9, 277). Half a century later, writing *Parsifal*, Richard Wagner similarly took the Good Friday mystery equivocally to release his hero from guilt of shooting the sacred swan at his story’s outset. Only then can they be shriven, as Gonville’s dying Namoa was not – to his priest’s later regret, guilt and redress in the second Indian Essomericq’s baptism; too late to save the priest from a death at other Indians’ hands that seems a retribution. To relate birds and their islands to Christian sacrament was usual, intimate and long-lasting. Again, these can only be passingly mentioned here.

In Gonneville's report the bird island comes plumb on the heels of the deaths and debates, offered pretty much as reward for hardship; now, sailors need not even go ashore to get the birds of this uninhabited island: like Thevet's later birds, they offer themselves freely, adding not just food, but their extra masses of feathers ("*gros en plume*") to those already being taken back to France as gifts to the King and exotic luxury consumer goods. Gonneville's view of indigenous peoples as "simple" and "innocent" stresses them as easily-manipulated objects for commercial or other domination, and the birds (equally *simplici*, said Vespucci) give themselves just as the Indians gave their local bounty in trade – chief among them feathers and featherware (1995: 23); or indeed, in another wishful, nastily euphemistic and eventually clichéd dimension, as the Indian women of Vespucci's first voyage were "beyond measure libidinous," showing "inordinate lust..., very desirous to have sex with us Christians," giving themselves just as did the birds (1951: 210). Zurara's *folgar* (play, frolic) refers to sailors raping native women.

Fernando de Noronha would long stay an ocean restaurant island, despite these reportedly constant depredations. Claude d'Abbeville was to write of his group's staying there a fortnight in June 1611 "*pour nous rafraichir.*" Besides many "excellent" vegetables and fruits, cattle, wild goats and large hens, results apparently of continual European landfalls, he wrote of

above all so great a multitude of birds of different species, unknown over here, that their number was infinite; what solaced us further is that they were excellent to eat, and easy to catch: for they did not just let themselves be slain in flight and on trees with clubs and sticks

but moreover taken by hand in their nests without moving. There were no fewer on Fire Island, near Fernando de Noronha, which were as big as geese and capons over here, along with smaller birds like pigeons of which most sat on their eggs in the grass and on the ground, whence they wouldn't move even when you pushed them with a foot to move them over for fear of stepping on them.

It is truly nearly unbelievable to hear of so great a number of birds so easy to capture, as I would never have believed, nor could believe, if I hadn't seen it for myself. Every day our crew members ate more than twelve hundred, without their number seeming ever reduced (1963: 52v-53r).

That the denizens of these islands were inexhaustibly numerous was always characteristic.

By the time Father Claude wrote in 1614 he hardly needed to connect metaphorical dots, though his religious mission made it easy. He and his fellows were on the way to bring the voice of the “Lion” of God to poor benighted Tupinamba forced into exile by greater heathens to ocean islands off Brazil's coast, where the Capuchins were now bringing them to “worship and service of the Lord, so withdrawing like birds into their true nests, and like doves into the dovecot of the true Church” (5v). The tie between people and birds had now been explicit for so long that it was, perhaps unconsciously, natural for Claude to make it well before he told of the bird island:

O little doves how loveable you are, and laudible! Yes these are beautiful doves without malice, doves of sweetness and simplicity, with no obstinate heart, who, invited by the voice of this celestial Spouse of the Canticles, come to seek this cornerstone my Savior Jesus Christ, to nest in the apertures of His sacred wounds: Doves who flitting till now over

waters of the flood of heathendom and paganism, finding nowhere to rest, now offer themselves in sweetness and all humility to be brought into the mystical Ark of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, to be protected from the universal flood of eternal damnation: for outside is no salvation.

But who will be the Noah who will lend a hand to these little doves, and open the door of this Ark to bring them inside and protect them from the wreck?

O France! It is thou.... (6r)

Doves of Christian symbolism had for three centuries been assimilated to those and other ocean-island birds. Claude pursues his *topos* of “poor Indian souls” (7v, 20r), “these poor lost sheep [*ouïailles*]” (9v) for pages. Innocent doves of Maragnan island and assertively self-immolating birds of Fernando de Noronha are of a piece. So are his conquering France and missionary church. To eat birds and savor Christ’s eucharistic wounds share a spectrum, along with louder cannibalism. Little wonder if later in his narrative Claude details how the Tupinamba appeared physically as birds; or if Pietro Martire had told in 1511 how on his second voyage Christopher Columbus found at Guadeloupe, “chiefe habitation of the *Canibales*,” pots with the mingled flesh of humans and birds and caught parrots there unlike any others (1885: 69, I.ii).

In Vespucci’s and Gonneville’s years Reinel charted a northern island of identical benefit to sailors, as Cartier and Thevet later made clear. Alonso de Chaves listed it in 1537 (1983: 377) with other *islas de aves* in the Windwards and off the coast of today’s Venezuela (283-4, 335), the last still so called. In 1540-2, Alonso de Santa Cruz listed Newfoundland’s bird island or rather, he said, islands, as well as noting vast numbers of

birds in Cuba, Hispaniola and smaller islands in the area (1908: 3, 17, 23, 25; 1992: 192, 231-2, 248, 252; 2003a: 449-50, 469, 479a) and again modern Venezuela's Isla de Aves (1908: 37; 1992: 284; 2003a: 499a). In 1544, Jean Alfonse repeated the Windward Island notice, where there were "forces oyseaux" and, like Santa Cruz, more than one off Newfoundland (1904: 443, 478, 498-9). By now these islands were everywhere, though everywhere isolated in the telling of actual seizure, slaughter and storage.

The Bristol merchant Roger Barlow wrote of sailing the Parana River upstream from the estuary in 1540-1, again coming across these useful islands and their compliant birds:

In one ilond that we came to there were no maner of birds in it but onlie all white hernes, where we went alande, and in less time then ij houres we killed with staves and bowes above a thousande, for thei wold not voide, but flie crieng about our heades [unsurprisingly, since they were trying to protect their young as well as themselves], and some with axes hewed downe the bowes of the trees and threwe downe the nestes with the yong, for the trees were laden with them and thei were fatte and wonderflie swete. And by other ilondes we passed wherin was none other birdes as we coude perceave but popyngayes and turtill doves and an other sort of smal byrdes which be no bigger of bodie then the toppe of a mans thombe but thei have the goodliest colored fethers that ever man might se, the colours wold change in moving of them as it were changeable silke. We toke one of them alive and kept it in a cage and was verie tame, it had a verie swete smell like muske, but it lived not long for lacke of knolege to diet it or other keping, and after it was dead we toke of the skynne, the heade, fete and feathers as nie we coude, and stuffed it with drie mosse and put it in a coffer, and it wold make all the coffer to smell wonders swete.... (1932: 161)

Birds now offer not just an orgy of killing and eating but even hummingbird deodorant. Barlow's picture of a herons' island recalls Zurara's of a century earlier (detailed in Chapter 4 of the book from which this essay is drawn). He readily could have known Zurara's work. He spent years in Seville, where he and his colleagues traded regularly in the Atlantic islands and knew the sailors, captains and factors who worked the coasts and ocean, so he would anyway have known others' reports of the islands. So it is not chance that the cited description directly follows a long one on how Guaranis captured, killed and ate their foes in war (157-9) and on how "beastlie" but easily convertible to Christianity they were. In turn, the Guarani tale follows a description of "the ile of lobus marinus" (Seal Island) where there "be many seales in so grete aboundans that ther maie be shippes laden with them in short tyme" (155). Farther upriver (162), "In other ilondes we sawe no thinge but cormorantes, and the meate of them be good and verie fatte and thei have no rankyshe savour as the cormorantes have here, for thei fede upon this fresshe water fysshe, which is the goodliest fattest and swetest that ever I sawe." He hardly needed to repeat the description of slaughter: his use of the same terms, *fatte*, *swete*, marks them as victims in the same style.

In 1519, Antonio Pigafetta had found an equally useful island off Patagonia's Deseado river: "truly, the number of the geese cannot be told. In an hour we crammed the five ships. These geese are black and have the same plumage on body and wings; they cannot fly and live on fish. They have such growth that there was no need to pluck them; we just skinned them. Their beak is like a crow's" (2002: 58-9; 1962: 101). Others, like

Santa Cruz, located a supply farther south in the Magellan Strait, on the one time when this *isolario* author actually told of killing and eating birds, at the island of “Ducks, so named because there were many and so very fat that they could hardly walk, and more or less ready plucked; of which they caught many for their voyage” (1908: 58; 1992: 335-6; 2003a: 525a). His ducks, like Pigafetta’s geese, were penguins. His island is now Penguin Island. Like Fernando de Noronha, like Newfoundland’s Isle of Birds and countless others, they would become an endlessly repeated *topos* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Bry *America pars IX*, 1601.
Dutch sailors killing penguins in the Magellan Strait on Sebald de Weert’s 1598-9 voyage.

Theodor de Bry’s 1601 scene of penguin butchery in the Magellan Strait’s islands exactly catches what this was about. Says Bernadette Bucher: “The Dutch conquerors,

armed with long hooked poles, haul their prey out of the burrows where the penguins hide. They then beat them with clubs and attach them by the beak to the poles ready to carry them on their backs” (1981: 124). So many were they that the Dutch killed nine hundred or so: twenty-five boatloads taken to the ship. Santa Cruz shows the Dutch not alone in hunting these islands’ massed penguins. English sailors too used their killing grounds as a living larder. Peter Carder, cast away in the Strait in 1578 on Francis Drake’s circumnavigation, “miraculously” survived because “we came to Penguin Iland in the Straites, and there we salted and dryed many of the Penguins for our sustenance” (PURCHAS, 1905-7: 16.137). Edward Cliffe, mariner, sailing on John Winter’s ship in the same expedition, tells of coming on “S. Georges island” (now Santa Magdalena) just north-east of the Strait, where

we staid one day & victualled our selves with a kinde of foule which is plentiful in that isle, and whose flesh is not farre unlike a fat goose here in England: they have no wings, but short pineons which serve their turne in swimming. Their colour is somewhat blacke mixt with white spots under their belly, and about their necke. They walke so upright, that a farre off a man would take them to be little children. If a man aproch any thing neere them, they run into holes in the ground (which be not very deepe) whereof the island is full. So that to take them we had staves with hookes fast to the ends, wherewith some of our men pulled them out and others being ready with cudgels did knocke them on the head, for they bite so cruellie with their crooked bills, that none of us was able to handle them alive (HAKLUYT, 1926: 8.96).

Bry's scene could as well be of this narrative, whose event recurred on Winter's return to the Strait; for separated from Drake he left the Pacific and sailed back to England (8.97). Cliffe's seeing the birds as children is lasting part and parcel, too, of the metaphor's meaning. On a 1591 voyage with Thomas Cavendish, Anthony Knivet told of repeatedly going to Carder's "Penguin Iland" to load birds, reminding us last that off the "faire pleasant Countrie" of Port Desire: "Here you may have great store of Penguins and Seales at an Iland that lieth a mile Southward of the mouth of the haven" (PURCHAS, 1905-7: 16.185-8, 266): Pigafetta's island. In 1646 Alonso de Ovalle noted that maps tagged these sites of good eating (1969: 66, I.xix). Descriptions of such "chandlery stores" are many, often reporting slaughters in the thousands (SPARKS and SOPER, 1987: 164-71). Calling her Dutch sailors conquerors in this context, Bucher glosses the metaphor's very sense.

In Bry's engraving, the astonished, bemused, how-can-you-do-this-to-me look of the big foreground penguin, not to speak of the extreme, yet distanced violence of the Europeans as they decimate the defenseless, socially-grouped and human-like population are rendered to sardonic perfection. One thinks of Pablo Neruda's penguin in its "inocencia interrogante," its questioning innocence (like Whitbourne's "innocency"), who "from the disorderly ocean / [as] immaculate passenger / emerges in snowy mourning" with the age-old wisdom of "its ancient ocean eyes":

aquel pájaro religioso	that religious bird
no necesitaba volar,	did not need to fly,
no necesitaba cantar	did not need to sing

y aunque su forma era visible	and though its form was visible
sangraba sal su alma salvaje	its wild soul bled salt
como si hubieran cercenado	as if a vein from the bitter sea
una vena del mar amargo. (2004: 56-7)	had been broken. (1985: 57)

One has to think too that now, twenty years after he made it, Montaigne's acid quip on American Indians' patent lack of civilization because they didn't "wear britches" (that had its own afterlife) lurked behind the britches-clad killers of naked innocent (*simplici* again) natives. Clearly britches-wearers were the barbarians; the quizzical, unarmed, communal penguins the humanely civilized. To have penguins figure responsible, moral human society (if yet victims), as in the kitsch moral-majoritarian film *March of the Penguins*, has a long lineage: though if you hold humans ever and unchangeably ungracious and aggressive then you must make the birds, *as* birds, their humane counter; which makes one ask how these penguins, herons, hummingbirds and doves, invaded, beaten, slaughtered and consumed in the wake and reflective of similarly-treated "savage" peoples, shaped how the invaders even *could* see their human prey. For if it is evident that by now the bird islands' critical meanings had long been clear to all, there is also no doubt that they deeply inflected understanding of the processes of ocean navigation, invasion, settlement and dispossession.

Thus Bartolomé de Las Casas, lucid on the metaphor and using it critically of Columbus' acts (if not of his mission as divinely ordained), decisively joined birds and the Antillean people of Columbus' first voyage in "simplicity," "gentleness," *mansedumbre*

and beauty. He relates Diodorus Siculus' tale of two captives sent as ritual scapegoats by "Ethiopians" south from Arabia across the Indian Ocean's "tempests and dangers" to an island of people as meek and lovely as Antilleans, unusual amid other traits for their tongues divided, "so they not only spoke like humans but sang like birds," able too to carry two diverse discussions at once (1986: 1.209, I.40). Las Casas does not add that Diodorus told of the islanders testing their infants' mettle by flying them on the back of giant birds (the ocean-island *rukḥ* of Persian and Arab fame): a rider showing fear or nausea was slain, cowardice and debility deemed hurtful to a good society. This people's chief deity was the sun, after whom they named their island and themselves (DIODORUS, 1933-67: II.55.1-60.3). Las Casas omits the last items but ends his chapter and tale by urging that Diodorus "speaks of other things, of the island and people, worthy of being read." He had already got his *Historia*'s reader used to his own linking of birds and people in withering invective of Spanish savagery. Surely that brutal reality and its now old image inevitably habituated invaders to ways of seeing *all* their victims? Europeans' instant awe at the beauty and ubiquity of American featherwear surely had its vicious component. It cannot be chance that artists fast depicted other invaded peoples, from Africa to India, in analogous garments.

So when Cortés and his fellows saw the "great splendor" of exquisitely feathered soldiers (GÓMARA, 2000: 270, 278) and the standards and crests held and worn by Tlaxcalan foes then chief allies, the blue heron (*aztlatl*) of Ocotelolco, strongest of their four districts, or the white of Tizatlan, what did they see (*Lienzo* 12, 53-4)? When did they know Tizatlan's ruler to be "Aztaua (holder of the heron), father of the young *Xicotencatl* who led the Tlaxcalans in the battles against and with Cortés" (SELER, 1923: 643-4), and

whom Cortés executed in 1521 (Fig. 4)?



Fig. 4: Tlaxcalan noble fighter. *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1892, image 22, detail (c. 1550).

“Captain-general of the republic,” he bore its standard that Francisco López de Gómara reported as “a golden crane with wings outspread and much enamel- and silverwork” and Bernal Díaz del Castillo as “a white bird with wings spread as if about to fly, looking like an ostrich” (2000: 134; 1994: 111a, lxiv). This less attests Díaz’s usual poke at Gómara than two standards, for Francisco Cervantes de Salazar copied Gómara on the Spaniards’ first sighting of Tlaxcala’s army (1971: 1.258b, III.xxxvi) but after the Tenochtitlan retreat, with Tlaxcalans allies for a year, he said Xicotencatl bore “a lovely large white heron so naturally woven from feathers as to seem alive” (2.85b, V.xii). The gold heron, Alonso de Zorita agreed in the 1570s (1999: 505), was Tlaxcala’s standard, the

white that of Xicotencatl's Tizatlan. Both are shown in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Carried before the army, the main standard was sent to the rear in battle but later put "where all might see it" (GÓMARA, 2000: 150). Cortés and his fellows heeded these "flags and gold shields and other insignia they wore set and fixed to their shoulders," such "gold shields" marking, his partner Francisco de Aguilar went on, "the Indians' captains" (1977: 70, 92). Seizing Tizapanzinca from Moteuczoma's men Cortés let them go "free, but without arms or standards, [...] which was a new thing to the Indians." At Otumba he saved the battle by spurring to kill his counterpart, who "bore the Mexican royal standard," so that all others "let fall their banners" and fled (GÓMARA, 2000: 115, 252).

Such insignia featured in later fiestas and church festivals, say the 1560s' *Anales de Juan Bautista* (REYES GARCÍA, 2001: 149§28, 155§38, 175§98, 185§125, 321§393...), recording an *aztatzontli*, heron's crested head, for the town of Aztahuacan (165§69). The blazon was usual, given the Aztecs' origin-story of Aztlan, "place of herons." They were equivocal victims. Early in a famous 1524 dialogue, Mexica nobles reminded their evangelizing Franciscan interlocutors that they trusted their own gods, whose tribute funded with other things war, figured in "its headdress of heron feathers, its jacket of cords" (KLOR DE ALVA, 1980: 110-1; SAHAGÚN, 1986: 140-1). Still, Las Casas' subliminal recall of Diodorus' bird-speaking "people of the sun" may have been as near bruising as others' invectives: Aztecs also worshiped the sun. Too, because the conquistadors put such vast store by their emulation of ancient heroes, mythical and historical, how might it weigh that the founder of Rome, Julius and Augustus Caesars' ancestor Aeneas, had his principal victim in Turnus, who hailed from and ruled over *Ardea* (*Aeneid* VII.411)? The name is

Latin for heron. And Cortés was often assimilated to Aeneas (as well as to Alexander).

Probably no conquistadors knew earlier European chronicles directly, but Arguim's Herons' Isle was fabled among Atlantic sailors; so far that even the diarist of Vasco da Gama's first voyage saw "many birds resembling herons" guiding them to the Cape of Good Hope, just past which they found what was to be another routine restaurant island: this one full of penguins (1945: 2; 1963: 4). Conquistadors were the more likely to connect these herons as all three first raids from Cuba to the Gulf's south coast had entered the "large lagoon" between Yucatán and Tabasco to find many such islands, said Diego de Landa in 1566, "filled with such variety of sea birds as are a thing of wonder and beauty" (1975: 31). In 1540 Motolinia noted all the birds Cortés' men found in the Papaloapan estuary: royal herons, storks, egrets, cormorants, the lovely *teucachul* (roseate spoonbill), prized "for the works the Indians make in feathers and gold," many ducks, some equally valued for "the plumage with which they weave rich feather robes," each bird worth a slave (1995: 164-6, III.11; cf. ZORITA, 1999: 266-7). In 1552 Gómara echoed the ducks of a slave's value, herons and *teuquechul*, cormorants, wild pigeons, raptors, storks and pelicans. Of the last he told another's tale of how one had taken a black baby, *negrillo*, in its pouch and, too heavy to fly, been easily caught (2000: 86-7). Was the metaphor being adapted to justify Spanish brutality on Yucatecs and Mexica for practicing human sacrifice? This could be why Gómara retold the tale, for Cervantes and Díaz, independently, held him wrong in *fact*, denying that Cortés even entered the estuary (1971: 1.204b, II.xxxvii; 1994: 61, xxxvii). The adaptation would be the easier as conquerors and settlers learned the immense part birds had in the material life and symbolic formations of the cultures of these

lands and how gods and humans alike were accompanied by, figured as and, more, actually identified with birds.

These ran a gamut from the crane bearing a mirror on its head that was the seventh omen of Tenochtitlan's ruin to the many feathered deities identified with birds. Of the first Sahagún, Diego Muñoz Camargo (1953-82: 13.3; 2002: 180) and then Enrico Martínez told how fishers in lake Tezcoco caught an unknown crane-like bird and took it to Moteuczoma. In its cranial mirror he saw the sky and stars, then “men of war who came from the west, [...] armed, fighting and killing” (138). This tale “repeated a thousand times, circulated throughout Indian and Spanish Mexico” (GRUZINSKI, 2008: 146). That it was likely a later fiction is as relevant as its ubiquity. Its elements were to Spaniards devilmets to be purged, to Indians interworld dialogue their new overlords meant to replace. This also went for the deities, among them Huitzilopochtli, hummingbird war god with his feather cape and crest of quetzal and... heron (BOONE, 1989: 5, 53), whose temple towered at Tenochtitlan's core, sacrificial focus of warring Aztecs; whom the “Spanish sensed [...] at the heart of all that threatened them” and Sahagún damned as chief Mexica god and demon (BROTHERSTON, 1974: 155), he and other *teotl* fast equated with Satan, “man-owl” using for his “anti-sacraments” and his aides, said Andrés de Olmos, birds (1979: 40, 72, 112).

Birds were seen in Moteuczoma's aviaries, with their 600 tenders, where plumage was culled for abundant articles of feathers and gold (all the palaces – these with their birds? – Cortés later burned to “upset” his foes). Birds and feathers adorned buildings and statues, soldiers and singers, princes and priests. They figured the thirteen days of the week,

fate-bearing *quecholli* of the sacred and secular *tonalpohualli* 260-day calendar. They executed the revered *volador* ritual, where men arrayed as birds flew on ropes down round a soaring pole as a bird-clad musician played and danced at its top: this preconquest dance was usual at sixteenth-century fiestas, where among other things it acted aching cultural and political loss (also to be treated at length). Birds featured in poetry and dance as singers and sung: *cuica*, to sing, and *cuicatl*, song, covering people and birds. The favorite singing voice of the Nahuatl, loving song and dance, was *tozquitl*, likened at its acme “to the notes of sweet singing birds” (BRINTON, 2004: 9) often imitated, as in the refrains of a “song of green places” credited to Nezahualcoyotl the Texcoco poet-king: “*ha ylili - yaha ylili y o huio, hui, ohui ohuaya ohuaya*” (*Romances*, 2009: 154; 1964: 93; WIGET, 1980: 3, 8). In *huehuehtlahtolli*, traditional moral speech used at formal social events, birds figured fathers, mothers, children and nobles; even the Christian god. Literate and illiterate invading and creole colonists were lapped in bird images: in architecture and statuary, warfare, song, dance and feast, daily habit and behavior and the sermons, rites, images, vestments and buildings of an ever more hybrid Christian religion. All this must be detailed, but let us always remember that our symbolic forms and their metaphors by which we live glove and are gloved in our feelings, activities and perceptions – especially when we know that these examples can be forever multiplied.

2. On metaphor and Renaissance perioddities

Studying the fact and ever more clearly metaphor of these bird islands (finally stretching centuries as an ever-denser, flexible, symbolic kernel) has ratified seeing the

“European” Renaissance as a result and process of intercultural traffic among the entire Mediterranean and Levant, Africa, Americas, Europe and then Indian Ocean world. The claim exceeds antiquarian interest. The historiography ruling westerners’ and others’ perception of the post-medieval world has long told a tale forging its history from solely western (firstly European) evolution and justifying cultural and political hegemony. The US internal “culture wars” of the last thirty years and external “crusade” (so named by the Bush administration and Arabs alike and often backed by the US academy, proudly or unawares, Geraldine Heng shows) of the first decade of the twenty-first century have reiterated the tale, demonstrating its stakes.

The bird-island metaphor’s ubiquity across national traditions seemed as significant as its constant iteration. There would be little to startle if, for instance, late sixteenth-century English or Dutch writers used it against Spanish ventures. By mid-century or soon after, the so-called Black Legend was well along and it is no surprise that Las Casas early knew and used the metaphor’s implications. But the bird-island image, first given expansionist transoceanic, colonial and commercial connotations, as far as I can find, by a twelfth-century Arab writer, was then used with ever more exact and intricate meanings by fourteenth-sixteenth-century Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, French, English and Dutch writers, at least. The metaphor was, that is, used approvingly or subversively of European ocean enterprises by multitudes of those who shared in it as well as by readers “avidly devouring all manner of travel accounts and relations of conquest and colonization in the Americas, Africa, and the East,” as Elizabeth Bearden describes these stories’ “obsessional” popularity (2012: 30). Too, as recent scholarship shows, these readers and

listeners included more than just literate urban elites (though we need to think “literacy” as far older, wider and complex than traditional scholarship has allowed). Bird islands became part of the symbolic underpinnings of later European cultural self-understanding, whose afterglow would cast a bright and ever wider arc into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even to the present. Along with what I have called cultural *rationes* or instruments, “standard categories of [...] thought and practice, [...] forms of analysis and practice, normative ways of thinking and doing” by which all members of a culture function, and judge and act on other cultures (REISS, 2002: 1-8, here 2), such symbols ground cultures and their practices.

After now fifty years’ study, I long ceased to think the Renaissance leapt full-grown from Petrarch’s Italy or stayed an intra-EU affair for ensuing centuries, leading duly, via crisis maybe but stately process still, to Enlightened splendor; whatever hurts its corrigible abuse may have wrought. Petrarch was of a mindset reflecting three and more centuries past of expansionist conflict and trade among Byzantines, Arabs, Latins (Aragonese, Catalans, Castilians, Venetians, Genoese, Sicilians, French) and latecome Ottomans. Donald Nicol traces Byzantium’s and Venice’s agelong ties. Anna Comnena’s story of nonstop eleventh-century Byzantine wars and traffic with Venetians, Normans, Scyths, Turks, Arabs and then crusaders is precious (more than Michael Psellus’, steeped in ancient Greece, eaten by palace intrigue, only hinting at those Egyptian and other Arab, Turkish, Latin ties).

Curiosities like the Catalan Company’s eighty-year rule in Athens and its environs that began in 1311 when Petrarch was seven and lasted, shakily at its end, until Turkish

defeat in 1394, entailed intimate ties among Catalans, Venetians, Turks and Greeks, besides hardly looser ones to other polities defining the Mediterranean basin for centuries (SETTON, 1948; JACOBY, 1966; 1974; BALARD, 2006: 305-9). I name this case here because it chances to coincide with Petrarch's life, though part of processes begun by the Fourth Crusade's 1204 sack of Constantinople and sixty-year Latin rule of its empire. Such ties surely ruled "merchants of Venice, Genoa," Marseilles and Catalonia with warehouses at Alexandria early in the same 1300s on the Nile and Red Sea route east. And what of a thirty-strong Ethiopian embassy to Spain in 1306, returning from Avignon and Rome, questioned at length in Genoa while awaiting passage home (CRAWFORD, 1958: 3, 11, 212)? Some scholars claim wider if vaguer trans-Eurasian relations, seeing tight influence and exchange in affinities of state-building, ethnic consolidation and military, population, trade and cultural change from western Europe to south-east and east Asia from c. 1500 to the 1800s (LIEBERMAN, 1999a). R. I. Moore thinks these start in the eleventh century, again in nebulous analogies. More tautly-defined if still extensive regions reveal a tighter and clearer embrace.

Twelfth-century Toledo and thirteenth-century Seville had long since been putting Greco-Arabic texts into Latin and Arabic *'adab* into Castilian. Far earlier, art and styles moved not just among the Mediterranean's Asian, African and European lands but as far north as Northumbria at the Scottish-English border. So did religion. All accompanied military, naval, political and trade activities. In the western and southern Mediterranean these were bustling by the eleventh-twelfth century (BRAUDEL, 1981-4: 3.92-6) and by Petrarch's time rivalry to participate was fierce, as his epistolary efforts to mediate show.

One can cite like exchanges over centuries among these cultures. Some saw a (Eurocentric) corollary early in the European ocean expansion. In his 1566 *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (Method for easy understanding of histories), Jean Bodin said of scientific, military, trade and religious expansion, especially American, that now “all humans share together and in a world state as if marvelously in one and the same polity,” *omnes homines secum ipsi, & cum Republica mundana, velut in una eademque civitate mirabiliter conspirant* (1951: 228a). In 1561, François Baudouin called on historical work to include with familiar old and new European stories those of Saracens, Turks and “the newly discovered islands of the West Indies” as recorded in the songs and writings of their people, who “adore letters” (36-7, 73-4; trans. GRAFTON, 2007: 117, 112-3; cf. GINZBURG, 2000: 31-4).

Thirty-five years before, Luigi Guicciardini had Charles de Bourbon make this link more brutally before the walls of Rome at sunset on May 5, 1527, urging his men to attack by saying that “among the Spaniards in this army are some who have seen a New World, which is already entirely obedient to our invincible Majesty” (1993: 81). To soldiers the salient event here was the 1521 sack of Tenochtitlan. The link marked basic legal and moral fights by 1548 when the official ban of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda’s *Second Democrates*, reviling Americans and justifying war on them, led to the 1550-1 Valladolid debate between him and Las Casas. Sepúlveda’s first *Democrates*, printed in 1535 at Rome, had defended that city’s sack. Twice in his *Brevísima relación*, issued the year after the debate, Las Casas measured Cuba, whose decimation he was savaging, in the loaded phrase “as long as from Valladolid to Rome” (1999: 77, 91): three capital cities, conflicted Valladolid,

Rome broken, Tenochtitlan, judge of Europeans' unChristian brutality, the *Relación*'s entire purport. These five writers were not alone and Federica Ambrosini shows how very many early sixteenth-century Spanish and Venetian humanists took Spain's American fortunes to prefigure its empire's divinely-inspired *renovatio* of "the whole of humanity" (1982: 77). But all this is to jump ahead.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes eloquently of our need to "move the centre" away from reliance on and imposition of old colonial metropolises. All cultures have their own site, tied to all others in the net of world cultures, each a knot of the net (1993; REISS, 2000; 2001). Each is a *different* knot, with its own forms, understandings and practices, its own vernaculars of language, custom, ways and being. Each bears the same weight, tension and stress as every other; each as vital. Each needs the ongoing strength and unity of all others. In a major essay collection, Patricia Penn Hilden adapts Ngũgĩ's idea "to de-center U.S. culture" (2006: 10) from "a Red Zone," an indigenous American cultural space; to move US culture urgently and essentially from a white European overculture, yet denying any putatively favored, if plainly non-hegemonic, under- or counterculture; so avoiding endorsing culture wars among, say, Chicano, African American or Native American on claims to an exclusive space – a center not in Ngũgĩ's and Hilden's generous sense of enabling new kinds and practices of exchange but in that of creating a site to shelter its own group and erect barriers against *its* "others." These repeat the overculture's predatory exclusivity, doing so not just in their form and practice but by enabling division to again profit the overculture. I cannot speak from a place like theirs, coopt a world not my European one. But all I have said implies that that world was *not*, ever, the center it was

forged into over the nineteenth century and that is now the US and still European overculture, if shakily. What follows seeks to continue unraveling that forgery, repair the net, rebind its knots.

Not a few will assert that to set the Renaissance in such terms falsifies the historical record in favor of “postmodern,” “postcolonial” correctness. Detailing the history glimpsed in the foregoing paragraphs rebuts the charge but even before doing so one need but notice that the “historical record” on which its makers call was largely a nineteenth-century European distilling. This is not to say that humanists of thirteenth-fifteenth-century Italy did not renew and spotlight many fresh Latin and then Greek texts, evolve perspective and realist painting, give new force to ancient architecture and music theory or recast ideas of state and civil society. It is not to say that these efforts did not wend slowly north via France to Britain and Germany and west to Iberia. But this is a terribly partial tale. Outside forces fed all these. Realist paintings ordered by merchants and others projected potent corporate wealth based in and boosting trade and cultural barter. Nor is this anyway at all a modern realism.

If portraits show “distinctive faces, they also show them as members of a particular class and family or as representatives of an office or institution. The individual stands for the collective,” says Willibald Sauerländer (2011a: 24). By the sixteenth century, portraits expanded “the means of societal communication and create[d] a new public visibility for the distinguished and well-to-do,” not exploring subjectivity (2011b: 61). The catalogue editors of a grand exhibit of fifteenth-century and beyond Italian portraits agree: “Rather than revelations of personality, they are conveyors of social conventions and cultural

identities” (BAYER, CHRISTIANSEN and WEPPELMANN, 2011: ix). Their essayists all concur; as does Andrew Butterfield, judging the portraits: however singular, they “chiefly presented a public identity, not a private one”: their “virtue and character were routinely understood to be familial, social, and political, not lyrical or psychological” (2012: 10). I have written much of this (REISS, 2003) and the point matters. Perspective may be likewise tied to mercantile, navigational and colonial reach. Even were all this not so, the tale would be no less partial. Its effect, if (maybe) not its first aim, has been to make Latin Europe and its avatars, creator and still core of modernity and of a “modern world system,” forging and then justifying the idea of its dominant metropolitan *centers*.

Not only does this story entirely omit the very early role of Spain and Portugal in different processes (many going contrarywise) but so it does the earlier, *longue durée* import of al-Andalus; the often hostile often fruitful relations among divers cultural and political powers of Mediterranean Africa, Asia and Europe evinced moments ago; endless intra-Mediterranean colonizings studied by Michel Balard and others; and nonstop assault by Europe’s “center” on its peripheries from tenth-fourteenth centuries (Bartlett, 1993 – however delicate are such judgments). The story naturally omits like processes in the Americas. It omits too the crawl of Atlantic drives from early fourteenth century (even the eleventh, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho says, and even by non-Arab fishers and traders: 1990: 67, 182-90), the later weight of Portuguese African spread and at last full Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Ocean ventures that in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries “brought” Africa and the Americas into an ever-wider dynamic of cultural exchanges finally grounding the “European” Renaissance.

Indeed the familiar story typically makes these ventures the *result of* (Italian) humanist inquiries that in fact clearly *follow* the maritime exploits. This last helps explain why Columbus' project, that of a mariner, said his acquaintance Andrés Bernaldez, "of great wit but small knowledge of letters, very astute in the art of cosmography" (1962: 270) and drawing on sailors' knowledge and lore and ideas from popular writers like John Mandeville (270, 307-8, 315, 319), was scorned by the humanist scientists who advised the rulers on whom he called; those "so many important persons of Your Highnesses' household," he said caustically to Ferdinand and Isabella in the *Schadenfreude* with which he closed the *Diario* of his successful first voyage, who in their "opposition and adverse opinion [...] were all against me, saying this project was a joke" (1989: 400-2). In his *Historia de las Indias* Las Casas hammered the point: from a letter Columbus sent to the Catholic Kings, where he wrote of those close to them who rejected his enterprise "with laughter and mockery," to the chronicler João de Barros, who in his *Asia* considered Columbus' project "a dream [...] based not on reason but fantasies," to the "insults" he had to sustain at the court of Castile from humanists noising ancient authoritative idiocies to dismiss his project as "pure madness and vanity" (1986: 1.30, 152, 157, 168: I.3, 28, 29, 31). He, too, ended with the *Schadenfreude* of the admiral's audition with João II, forced to swallow his angry shame for rejecting the project, and repetition of Columbus' speech to the Kings (1.337, 339: I.74, 75). Here humanists *opposed* such ventures. Even by October 1455, Lorenzo Valla's inaugural lecture at Rome's university extolling the city's ancient providential empire and Latin tongue as diffusers "of commerce and arts" was emphatically not "a prophecy of European expansion overseas that was about to begin" (GINZBURG,

1999: 66). It signaled an already long-ongoing process whose companion artisanal, pragmatic and even commercial approach to knowledge was routine among navigators (and others) and would soon forge the basis of what we now call science (REISS, 2005b; BARRERA-OSORIO, 2006: esp. 57-8).

Humanists and later European historiography also left out of the familiar tale the fact behind my quotation marks a paragraph ago on the word “brought” to signal the place of the Americas and Africa in the widening cultural dialogue of the 1400-1500s. At least for Africa the relation must be put otherwise. For whatever the American case, North and East Africa north from modern Tanzania had shared in the old world’s trade and cultural net for millennia. Much of sub-Saharan West Africa had been meshed in the same net via the trans-Sahara trade routes for seven-hundred or far more years when Latin Europeans began to tiptoe back into that African-Mediterranean-Asian *oikoumene* (MORAES FARIAS, 2003: cxvi; AUSTEN, 2010: 21-2, 13-17). The Latin traders in Alexandria of the early 1200s tardily used a well-worn route up the Nile and over the Red Sea to East Africa and India.

Some humanists’ and later historians’ hostility to continuities that set them in a non-European story was fully witting: how are we to see Petrarch’s potent arabophobia? not least as we now know that one of its core items, Arab poetry’s depravity (*Sen.* XII.2), that Francesco Gabrieli thought showed Petrarch knew it firsthand (1977: 245-7), really came from Hermann the German’s mistranslation of Averroes’ gloss on Aristotle’s *Poetics* (BURNETT, 1997). How do we see Italians’ view in the 1100-1300s that as Salerno was famed in “medicine, Bologna in law, Paris in theology,” Arab and Jewish Toledo, all Iberia,

had but “demons” and “negromancy” (CROCE, 1949: 11-12)? Edward Said’s study of nineteenth-century European orientalist springs to mind: above all given Petrarch’s lifelong promotion of a centered Christian empire and colonial expansion clear in his Scipionic epic *Africa*, the poem that made him laureate and in which he saw his lasting monument of bronze.

These Latin views stayed ubiquitous (DANIEL, 1966; 1993; KEDAR, 1984) even as Italian cities and humanists entered into ever closer relations with Christian Iberians, peaking in what Benedetto Croce calls a “more or less shared life for more than two centuries,” sixteenth to eighteenth (1949: 1). Nor is this antagonism at all offset in Brian Curran’s study of humanists’ captivation with ancient Egypt from at least the early fifteenth century. On the contrary, their Egypt came filtered through ancient Greek and Latin texts and ruined monuments of Rome and other Italian cities. While Greeks had seen Egypt as source of much of their culture, what lured humanists was rather an exotic presence subsumed into certain chiefly Roman artifacts and a mysterious secret spirituality inferred from the indecipherable hieroglyphs of transported obelisks, whose “proto-Christian” ancient wisdom was brought most dazzlingly to light in a manuscript of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* brought to Florence around 1422 by Cristoforo Buondelmonti (also author of the earliest of *isolari*) and in 1560-2 by a manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum* brought also to Florence and instantly translated by Marsilio Ficino at Cosimo de’ Medici’s order (CURRAN, 2007: 58, 90-2, 107). However many “agendas” ancient Egypt served (279), it mostly signaled updated Roman imperial conquest and Christianity triumphant – lending itself to divers papal pretensions, not least Leo X’s obsession with “renewal of crusade in

the East” (78, 167-225, here 191, 281) – and an Other characterized by ways of thinking and feeling alien and subaltern in a *European* Mediterranean past under recovery and renewal. Such characterizations were of a piece with overtly antagonistic views of contemporary Arabs and others.

Seeing humanism as following and even *enabled* by other doings (including cultural change like the syncretism of eleventh-twelfth-century Sicily and its later renewal by Frederick II, the great Arab-Latin translation project of twelfth-century Toledo and Alfonso X’s next-century “sequel” of Arabic *‘adab* into Castilian vernacular or even complex twelfth-century Crusade minglings) has to alter other facets of the familiar story or, better, its very nature. When Ngũgĩ sums up this story by saying that the European fourteenth-sixteenth centuries named “Renaissance” by nineteenth-century scholars “coincid[ed] with the beginnings of capitalist modernity,” he rightly catches the story’s no doubt very-adjusted plot as going from Italian humanism and coeval city-state economic expansion via widening humanist historical and political thinking to Atlantic and Indian Ocean expansion: the last and its economic, political and social outcomes still held to result really from the first. Likening modern Africa’s situation to this European age, he adds: “such a comparison is inevitable for Africa because European capitalist modernity, emerging out of these voyages of the body and mind, was rooted in slave trade, slavery, and colonialism” (2009: 70). This is so. But slave trade, slavery and colonialism were deeply aspects of European expansion that long predated even late-thirteenth-century humanism’s rise; tangled too in those cultural exchanges indicated. I do not aim simply to invert the story’s ordering of human practices: to replace, say, one putting humanism’s cultural moves first by one giving

primacy to economies, trade or politics. Such adjustments have always been part of the story as of its strength. Not touching the core claim that its first centuries were purely internal to Europe, they leave the story the known one that Raymond Schwab called “a family matter inside a hermetic little Mediterranean room” (1984: 16): not the capacious far-flung “Mediterranean” evoked here but the Italo-centric confines of familiar Renaissance telling.

Post-1940s’ scholarly studies of a thirteenth-century prehumanism with deep medieval roots do likewise: again giving the same tale its elastic force. Their Middle Ages are briefly Provençal or French but still above all Italian. Ronald Witt can thus open a decisive book on the topic by saying: “From the twelfth to the early sixteenth century, the major lay intellectuals of western Europe were in Italy” (2000: 1). Not really. They were yet earlier in al-Andalus (as across the Islamic world) the *fuqahā*, men of law, or the “clerical” *‘ulama*, “lettered class and guardians and interpreters of the sacred law of Islam,” who were also “the best-traveled and most cosmopolitan intellectual class in world history up to that time. Their primary loyalty was not to state, nation, or tribe, but to the *dar al-Islam*” spanning the known world by the ninth century. Thus “the most mobile and best educated among the scholarly class possessed a sharper universalist vision of humankind, a broader mental grasp of the inhabited regions of Eurasia and Africa, than any other group in the world” (DUNN, 1994: xii-xiii). The judgment is usual (BOVILL, 1995: 60; CHARLES-DOMINIQUE, 1995: xi-xxvii; TOUATI, 2000). Edward Blyden held it true still in 1871 (1994: 215). David Levering Lewis records ninth-century Cordoba’s intellectual classes: “in addition to *ulamas*, priests, and rabbis, [...] lawyers, architects,

astronomers, physicians, bureaucrats” (2009: 306). We shall see others. In the Latin west the brilliant tenth-century cleric Gerbert of Aurillac (later pope Sylvester II), may have been unique. In Barcelona, Cordoba and Seville the mathematics he learned from Muslim masters was common lay science (ibid.: 328-30).

Recent study shows Provençal intellectuals vital to Italian cultural tides (as Witt establishes) rooted in Andalusí culture. This matters too since western Mediterranean polities were not just very early engaged in expansive and colonizing trade but had drawn into it Italian towns like Amalfi, Gaeta, Genoa, Naples, Pisa and Salerno. The full story cannot make Europe a lone island but must tell an intercultural dynamic. Local realities are of course essential. Their telling is to be criticized only when they are taken for the general or hypostasized into the universal: sins that Witt avoids with ever-delicate and deep erudition and debate but of which others, including Jacob Burckhardt and countless disciples, are more careless.

A recent heir or corollary of the nineteenth-century tale belongs here. This is the scholarly debate over the role of post-Columbus Atlantic discoveries and invasions (for fifteenth-sixteenth-century Europeans they were both) in Europe’s culture. Despite critical work on their impacts by an art historian like Claire Farago, consensus still favors John Elliott’s view that these had little effect on most Europeans’ worldview until the Enlightenment and that evolution of their science, ethics, theology and even ethnography and geography came rather from late-humanist probing of ancient thinkers (1970; 1976; 1989; cf. RYAN, 1981; BURKE, 1995). Elliott mainly sought “to isolate those changes directly attributable to the impact of America from those which were already incipient or

under way at the moment of discovery and conquest” (1970: 79). But he had already said that “in changing and refining” most Europeans felt “discovery of America was important, less because it gave birth to totally new ideas, than because it forced Europeans to come face to face with ideas and problems which were already to be found within their own cultural traditions” (1970: 47). This hints the very idea of dividing direct impact from ongoing change to be flawed and self-fulfilling. Few Europeans not directly tied to American ventures, says the consensus, spoke of let alone were touched by them for some two centuries after 1492. Mulling a 1991 conference on an American role in “European consciousness” and culture, Elliott noted consent “that for sixteenth-century Europeans preoccupied by the current conditions of their own society, an impressive range of alternative models already existed in the biblical tradition and the literature of classical antiquity. The primitive Christian church, the world of the Golden Age, the Scythians, the Spartans, the Romans – all these provided models and points of reference.” America was now added as a kind of “optional extra” (1995: 394).

For a 1992 exhibit at the New York Public Library, Anthony Grafton and his colleagues elaborated Elliott’s thoughts on the issue, agreeing that the American enterprise began as Europe was “in the throes of an intellectual revolution [since] well before the discovery of the New World,” starting in “Italy from 1350, in northern Europe somewhat later”: so from a good Petrarchan origin (GRAFTON, 1992: 28). Those wishing “to depict the New World could find enough ingredients in the classical heritage to produce a kaleidoscopic variety of juxtapositions and compounds.” A European ethnographer could paint America “without using a single color not available on the palette offered by the

ancients.” “Ancient texts and theories [...] yielded solutions to agonizing historical, ethical, and religious problems” (42, 46, 148; cf. SALAZAR-SOLER, 1999). But to conclude that these “classical texts and concepts have been, for the west, above all a set of tools,” appealing “even now” (256), rather voids them of exact utility and shows them part of a familiar Petrarchan tale. Detailing factors that Elliott waived in his 1969 lectures, these theses repeat his and the consensus they forged. I am unfair to the generous grasp of Grafton’s scenario (and grossly so to his total *œuvre*) but here I stress the lasting hold of our western tale, that has another version, Louise Tachot observes, in Stephen Greenblatt’s verdict that “there is no Renaissance Herodotus,” no coeval historian of the conquest recording its victims with a condoling, unbiased eye. At issue now was not “the history of a great culture’s salvation but [...] the chronicle of a great culture’s destruction, a chronicle written for the most part by cruel and intolerant victors, often quite ignorant of the peoples they had conquered. Most Europeans turned upon the natives of America the indifferent gaze of men who do not care whether the beings before them live or die” (1991: 128; TACHOT, 2001: 221-2). Americans erased in fact, regard and tale clearly have no agency in our self-regard and understanding, indeed no agency at all.

He finds one exception in Díaz’s *Historia verdadera*, in the “humble,” plain, honestly observed and above all un-“artful” telling of direct experience *not* refracted by the lense of school learning and ancient rhetoric or told in their colors (128-45). Unlettered Díaz did not figuratively repeat literal carnage of Nahua civilization in his story because *he did not know* ancient models or their palette. But to take Díaz at his own rating risks major misconstrual, scholars have shown. It also biases our reading of the “artful” historians Díaz

was assailing. Many, including the most read, from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo and Gómara to Las Casas and José de Acosta, used their art to query not just the havoc to which Greenblatt finds them indifferent but the models and palette, indeed the very learning and wisdom these last reputedly represented and sustained, even as they probed to quite other effect, Gómara feeling benefit to both sides outweighed cruelty, Las Casas that Spanish ferocity erased what should have been bounties of conversion. However we judge their eventual assumptions, they do not adopt them thoughtlessly and without accountability to their sources or to those of whom they write.

True, as in all long-running debate extremes have been blunted, and Elliott too has tempered his belief, feeling impact not to lie in blunt diachronic reception but in “constantly changing angles of vision, each with its distinctive areas of focus and distortion” (1995: 397): that we need seek not quantifiably specific assimilated objects or ideas but, with Michael T. Ryan, change in “conceptual strategies through which contemporaries interpreted their world” (401; RYAN, 1981: 523). But *some* charge of the last was never at issue and that Elliott sees Bodin’s *Republica mundana* first as opening the world on Europe’s terms (1970: 53) then hinting “a more ample and comprehensive vision of the physical, moral and religious world” (1995: 404 citing HEADLEY, 254), requires more than minor tuning of his lasting view that “between 1493 and around 1650 the effect of America is not so much to generate new departures in European consciousness as to reinforce existing proclivities and predispositions” (1995: 403). Even if America affected only choices made among these last, that would already be a major inflection of European “consciousness.”

No doubt, to take one more instance from early days of ocean expansion (another that will recur), even if Denys Lombard can justly say that an epic like Luis Vaz de Camões' 1572 *Lusiads* "envisaged [...] a cultural unification of the world," the poem still upholds Elliott's case by setting it in European *conquest* (1993: 179). But Lombard's point is that two other fictive visions of these years imagine global unification, also via storied literal and symbolic voyages in search of "limits" – from quite other places. One is Chinese, romanticizing the 1405-33 Indian Ocean voyages of admiral Zheng He, the other the Malay Alexander epic. What and how they share is intriguing. That both set the projected union under their own conquests is predictable and relatively trivial, as may be other overlaps. Not trivial here is that their actors make their own agency primary, largely mirroring their European counterpart, in one case in an actor whom the European imaginary has always seen as its own and prime exemplar of seminal European reason, might and right. The Malay *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnein* (history of two-horned Alexander) makes *its* hero paragon of expansive Islam. However we judge the nature of their agency, it surely seems "subjective" and "expansive" in ways similar to those the usual post-Burckhardt Renaissance story touts as created by Petrarch and his successors: with which I have disagreed at length (REISS, 2003: 303-528). My point is that such epics would not let even this (central) aspect of the familiar story be uniquely European.

What they reveal is that this was "a world in which there was a continuous movement of people, commodities and ideas, both across and around the Atlantic Ocean," and indeed globally. Here I cite Elliott writing recently of eighteenth-century "British America" and its Atlantic (2012: 35), a date fully agreeing with his older thesis. But clear

from Lombard's example and many others is that the movement was underway far earlier. It *was* a real circulation, not a one-way street. Elliott fears here that this "new approach" and "infinitely more complex" critical historical awareness "has led to a blurring of focus," adding that the ideal to "show the interconnectedness of Europe, Africa and the Americas [...] [i]n practice [...] has proved to be a tall order." Well, yes. Both are surely the point. The premise that Europe was the agent whose action enabled (or forced) others, patients, to feed it was a foundation built on the sands of the search to justify European exceptionalism and dominion, "blurring" the "focus" those two provided is at least a first crucial step. At the same time, wholly to respond to the cultural actions of three continents (to say nothing of those of the Indian and Pacific Oceans) can be nothing but "a tall order." It is one that has to be welcomed.

There are deeper lessons to be learned from comparing narratives like Lombard's. But for now, and at the least, they can make us *see* differently. For the stock European story through which I have been trolling strips Europeans' victims not just of cultural artifacts and actions influential beyond their direct contexts but of the agency they entail and of the effects of such agency as much, the historians say, as their fifteenth-sixteenth-century ancestors did. This is in flux. So, for New Spain/Anahuac, the work of James Lockhart (1992), his students and others with postconquest native-language records shows how strong native populations stayed, controlling their lives, adopting/adapting Spanish elements, eventually producing transcultural realities. But for the sixteenth century anyway, high tide of my metaphor, this itself could seem cultural isolation, as many earlier historians and anthropologists posited and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra rebukes (2002: 207).

That most restaurant bird islands were wrongly shown as isolated may figure ideological need for and implications of denial of miscegenation and cross-cultural exchange. Such needs can impact contemporary historians no less than they did those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Gazing back in 1624 at these and the ancients, Robert Burton in the second edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* asserted “with Didacus Stella,” that like “a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant” he could “add, alter, and see further than [his] predecessors” (1968: 1.25). Like so many, Robert Merton has Burton looking just “two ways: toward the ancients for wisdom that should be transmitted to his own day and toward the moderns who, drawing upon that wisdom, could proceed to broaden and deepen it” (1965: 8). This was doubtfully true even for Burton, who saw as “God’s especial providence, that in all ages there should be [...] a transmigration of nations [...] to alter for our good, our complexions.” In the far past God had sent “an inundation of those northern Goths and Vandals [...] a sound generation of strong and able men [...] to qualify and make us as those poor Indians are generally at this day, and those about Brazil (as a late writer observes), in the isle of Maragnon” (1968: 212-13). Burton noted his “late writer” as d’Abbeville, his source for nations’ transmigration as Bodin on their periodicity in the *Republic* (1.479). His near forebears, too, look more than two ways: besides European ancients and their own expansive present, they look to, learn from and absorb an Arab, Asian and African circum-Mediterranean and, well before what is now called the European Renaissance had wide or even firm ground, the Americas.

Too, as the initially medieval aphorism of dwarfs on giants’ shoulders gives a

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window onto how the praxis and, vitally, imagination and sensibility of scientific discovery are rooted in specific histories and local cultures, so the actuality and metaphor of bird islands open a port on perceptions, emotions and judgments of ocean expansion, the intercultural exchanges, mediations and violence in which it and they began and went on living, the deep cultural changes they bred and, more than Merton's aphorism, the histories, contexts and peoples grounding all these. As Baudouin, Bodin and their coeval Louis Le Roy held (he in his 1575 *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers*), these histories, contexts and peoples were as twined as Ngũgĩ urges; by turns leaders and laggards in cultural authority: an idea still central to Fernand Braudel's thesis of civilizational growth, in the form of alternating economic and political primacy of cities (1981-4: 3.32-5) or in others' views of shifting "centers" and "peripheries" (CASTELNUOVO and GINZBERG, 1994; LIEBERMAN, 1999b). The idea implies that *all* these histories and peoples are potential sources of untold wisdom and action.

The idea, in the form of *translatio imperii* and coeval, prior or following (as debate took it) *translatio studii*, is old. Lately it guided humanists on their relation to Antiquity. New in Bodin and the rest is their global inclusiveness. And insofar as the *translationes* were held to travel westward (CURTIUS, 1963: 29; NAVARRETE, 1994: 16, 23) America was clearly their future, as Burton would hint. So it is ironic that one of the keenest and best known statements of the *translationes* as paired signs of new power was uttered on the very cusp of Atlantic invasion. "Always," said Antonio de Nebrija, prefacing his 1492 Castilian *Gramática*, "language was companion of empire; and followed it in such a way that together they began, grew and flourished, and later together was their joint fall" (1980: 97).

An “historical survey” of earlier eastern and western powers lets him “substantiate this assertion of connection and cycle,” Ignacio Navarrete shows, even as he hints that the usual decline of states may be halted in Spain as “the westernmost European country” (1994: 19-23). Nebrija was certainly thinking of Castilian victory over the last Iberian Arab realm of Granada early in 1492 and concurrent exile of the Jews. But at the same time, Spanish seizure and “pacification” of the Canaries was concluding and general Iberian Atlantic expansion was surging, with Portugal in the Cape Verdes and far west Azores and rounding Africa in the far south. Nebrija and his grammar were well known and the irony of finding advanced American cultures within thirty years would not be lost on those especially who would rejoice to see Spain take that cyclical fall. On the other hand, if Iberia could absorb American lands and peoples into their *translatio* “westernmost” still held. They would certainly try. As would their foes to prevent it. By the time Nebrija’s grammar was known widely, his prologue inevitably raised the specter of the Americas and their role in such considerations.

Was Bodin unusual? Tommaso Campanella in Burton’s early seventeenth century is late but for John Headley to feel his late *Monarchia Messiae* of 1633 sums up a lifetime in which “America served as a summons to world community, calling Europeans forth from the parochial to the global, the universal, envisaging a world without walls, a global order nurtured by unhampered commerce, communication, and intellectual exchange” (1995: 263) is suggestive; although Campanella’s case needs care, for from his 1598 *De monarchia hispanica* he had urged an eschatological view of a Spanish universal monarchy enabling the union of all humanity prior to the Second Coming, adopting decades-old ideas.

Even so, he agreed foursquare with such as Baudouin and Bodin:

Read the individual histories of all the nations, French, Spanish, German, British, and Ethiopian (for you will find this too) and Turkish and Moorish. You must receive the traditions of the New World from their inhabitants, for they lacked writing. Likewise what the Chinese, Japanese and Tartars, the inhabitants of Ceylon, Persia, India and other nations record in writing or by memory of their origins and their deeds, Jesuits and voyagers have written much about this. But this should really be a task for kings, especially the Spanish one... Whatever the pretenders claim, universal history is not yet complete, but only partial (CAMPANELLA, 1954: 1254; trans. GRAFTON, 2007: 121-2).

Like Baudouin and Bodin, he sought what Grafton justly calls a “catholic history that would include the ancient Near East and the recently discovered New World, Asia and Africa, as well as the traditional territory of learning, Greece and Rome,” a “history [...] genuinely cosmopolitan in its sources” (2007: 68, 105; cf. GRUZINSKI, 2004: 25, 38, 129; 2008: 199-200). Guicciardini’s history of the sack of Rome, written as the events unfolded, assumed, we saw, such global relations, as did his brother Francesco’s history of Italy, begun in 1537 (if only printed in 1561). Before century’s end, Joseph Justus Scaliger would be trying to work the Mayan calendar into his study of chronology as an equal to Greek, Babylonian, Jewish, Arabic, Saxon, Egyptian, Roman and Christian calendars from which he hoped to forge a universal history (GRAFTON, 1993: 394-459).

Suggestive, too, was John Selden’s 1613 note that foxes likely reached England because in the past the land joined the continent (ARMITAGE, 1995: 60). The remark

echoed Acosta's 1590 explanation of humans and animals reaching America by a northwest land bridge (1954: 33, 38a, II.xx, xxiv; 129, IV.xxxiv). Headley's and others' judgments of Campanella's life-work is clear. For their part, Acosta's and Selden's remarks matter not as minor explanatory analogies, no more useful than the often outlandish similitudes taken from ancient writers, but as signaling a growing habit of thinking in terms of global transfers; indeed of a changing *physical* world itself crucial to these. Acosta was sure, like all his western-hemisphere cohort as early certainly as Oviedo, that *physical* and "moral" diversities coincided. All shared an interwoven divine scheme that here he grounded in American geography and indigenous sources. His *Historia* first appeared in Latin, Italian, French, English and then Dutch: thus available to the practitioners of Europe's expansive states. This unfolding vision of a worldwide human community set in a physical world whose sphericity and oceans in fact *enabled* dialogue and exchange may explain why the "word globe, which comes from the Latin *globus*, meaning a crowd of people as well as a sphere, does not enter into English use as a representation of the world until after the discovery of the Americas" (BEARDEN, 2012: 197).

Campanella notably, but many others, may have been recalling his renowned compatriot, Giambattista Ramusio, who far earlier, in 1550, in his best-selling *Viaggi*, had expressed surprise that the "great princes, to whom God has deputed this duty, and who always have in their councils men of superior learning and intelligence," have not been reminded

that one of the most admirable and wondrous deeds they do in their life would be to bring

the people of our and the opposite hemisphere together as one [*saria il far cognoscere insieme gli uomini di questo nostro hemispero con quelli dell'altro opposto*], whence they would be reputed gods, as the ancients held Hercules and Alexander, who did no more than get to India, and the credit of this unparalleled enterprise would far surpass all those of Julius Caesar and any other Roman emperor (1563: 373v, *Discorso...delle spetierie*; cf. GRUZINSKI, 2008: 44).

Though Ramusio put Marco Polo and others in his collection, here he clearly made the Americas the spark of the global mutual knowledge and awareness that others would soon be announcing and undertaking. That he set this enterprise under the aegis of deified Hercules and Alexander (and Caesars), all of them less worthy than would be their modern ocean-going counterparts, has wider ramifications, we saw.

Our stories too need new conceptual strategies. Partly they do, says Ayesha Ramachandran, because America's mere *existence* upended Europeans' world-concept and thus their sense of "self" (2009). But they do because American cultures *did* have early impact. Roland Greene shows how from late fifteenth century, international Petrarchism itself, honed by poets "many of whom [were] explorers, diplomats, and administrators" (and soldiers), put "imperialist questions" to their readers, often with material, spiritual or moral "investments in the Americas" (1994: 243; see 1995; 1999). In 1970, Elliott alleged that as "the handiwork of 'barbarians', the artistic creations of the peoples of America exercised virtually no influence on sixteenth-century European art. They were at best confined to collectors' cabinets, mute witnesses to the alien customs of non-European man" (32). Miguel de Cervantes' use of Mexican *lienzos* as tools for thinking saps this claim too

(BEARDEN, 2006; 2012: 100-27). Notably, as early as September 1522 Venice's envoy to Charles V, Gaspare Contarini, reporting Ferdinand Magellan's voyage and Hernán Cortés' defeat of "a huge city called Temisitam [Tenochtitlan]," said that if its people "have not letter characters, yet they write some most necessary things [*qualche cosa più necessaria*] with animal figures or otherwise, just as the Egyptians did of old, though these their characters do not serve them for everything" (SYMCOX, 2001: 137).

The information fit American pictographs into a century-old debate on hieroglyphs that held humanists from Poggio Bracciolini and Cyriacus of Ancona to Leon Battista Alberti. In hieroglyphs all saw "picture-letters [*lettere figurate*]," as Filarete put it around 1460 (CURRAN, 2007: 85), that were, said Alberti in his *De re aedificatoria*, begun by mid-century, a universal language subsuming particular alphabets because giving direct conceptual access to their objects' significance or, Ficino added in 1492, "to the simple and permanent form of things" (CURRAN, 2007: 70-6, 97; 58-105 for all). For many by now their "conception of the hieroglyph [...was] broad enough to be applied to virtually any kind of communicating imagery" (146), easing reception of the new pictographs. By the 1550s, Gianfranco Cantelli shows (1986: 342), thanks to Cortés, Alonso de Zuazo, Oviedo, Gómara and pictographic scripts sent to Spain, these too were seen as writing: intrinsic to debate on historiography, evidence and for centuries linguistics (357). By 1557 the polymath Sebastián Fox Morcillo "grudgingly admitted" them as history (GINZBURG, 2000: 51). Three years later Fox drowned sailing from Leuven to Spain where Philip II had named him his son's tutor (KAMEN, 1998: 77): celebrated he was, and mainstream. In his 1560 dialogues *Della historia*, Francesco Patrizi urged "a new historiography that

privileged images and other nonwritten sources over written ones” (as did indigenous historians). He shared “a larger tendency in the Catholic Church to exalt the historiographic value of images in theological debates with iconoclastic Protestants” (CAÑIZARES-ESGUERRA, 2001: 65, 89).

Some European scholars used Mexican pictographs even earlier to attest the case. In New Spain, Spanish, creole and native historians had never doubted the pictographs’ literacy and their historiographic function. Motolinia explained this at the start of the *Memoriales* that he probably began by 1532 (2009: 3-4) and by 1606 Enrico Martínez was only stating common knowledge in recording “painted” documents “that served as calendars, done with such skill and good order that not only did they serve them [indigenous readers] to reckon their feast days and times of the year; but also as [history] books, for in them they set down each thing that happened with clarity such that for many centuries after it could be understood as if written in a book.” He was describing here one “made by fray Toribio de Motolinia,” so praising their actual *use* by a European scholar (1948: 122). Spaniards in New Spain were “experimenting with pictorial communication” from the early 1530s (LOCKHART, 1992: 330). By 1570 Bernardino de Sahagún told pope Pius V in the prologue to the second part of his *Breve compendio*, sent in hope of intellectual, spiritual and funding help, that “everything [he and his elite partners] debated” for his great history of Indian New Spain, *Anahuac*, “they told me in paintings, for this was the writing [*escritura*] they used of old, and the linguists explained them in their language, writing [*escribiendo*] the explanation at the foot of the painting” (1990: 16). To use the same term for pictograph and script supposes their equivalence. For Cantelli (1986: 344,

348, 350-5) approval in Europe of the historiographic and scientific utility of such techniques peaked in the 1581 *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* of Gabriele Paleotti, cardinal-archbishop of Bologna, seeing in pictographs (like hieroglyphs) a direct, convention-free expression of the world, a more “natural” and “universal” way to convey information than alphabetic writing.

These are a rather ignored part of long-running debate on the nature, use and aims of history and historiography that many scholars have studied. Associated with them was hard thinking, fired by African and American practice, on orality, memory and history which, whatever the weight of medieval usage, was inflected into new paths. In 1535 Oviedo likened American collective songs, *areitos*, to Spanish and Italian folk practices, asserting them bearers of history “so that they do not forget, above all famous victories in war” (1992: 1.114b), voicing, too, cultural contest and political power (REISS, 2005a: 4). In 1554 Jacques Amyot took this up. Prefacing his French Plutarch, a book “that changed Europe forever,” says Carlo Ginzburg, he evoked the centrality of historical memory to people even before they have “the use of letters, [...] as we see in our own day in the case of the barbarians living in the new Western lands, who with no written records had knowledge of things occurring at least eight hundred years before,” for they were taught in song from infancy (cited GINZBURG, 2000: 97-8n12). Baudouin and others latched onto this specific case and its comparison with European folk traditions and more erudite genres of history and information, many of them finding like practices among modern and ancient Europeans and wishing they could use them now.

In the early 1580s, the Jesuit Juan de Tovar joined pictographs and oral memory in a

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well-known letter to Acosta who had queried the reliability of a history of the Nahua Tovar had written and sent him: as to 1) its authority; 2) how the Indians, “lacking writing,” could remember so much intricate matter for so long; and notably 3) how they could exactly recall so many specific speeches. Tovar replied that he had worked from *librerías*, “collections of books that these people keep of these things [...] in characters and hieroglyphs.” Learned men, “*sabios* of Mexico, Texcoco and Tula” trained to read these writings, had worked with him on his history. Further, Acosta had in fact read a second version of Tovar’s history, its first now out of his hands, since when he had read another such history (by Diego Durán), exactly recalling his own not least because it “closely followed the collection of old books that I had seen” (1929: 451). Answering for his history’s authority, Tovar thus also replied to the second question: for anything whose “exact image” cannot be painted “they have other signifying [*significativos*] characters for it, and with these they figure as much as they wish.” Their written calendar lets them retain exact “memory of times in which memorable things occurred.” Too, profiting by their “figures and characters [...] [being] not as adequate as our writing,” they trained in speech and song to pass “the most famous speeches” from teacher to pupil, repeating them exactly (452). These familiar *huehuehtlahtolli*, speeches used on formal occasions, said Tovar, were stock oral formations passed through generations. Indians of north central America had forged in speech, memory and pictorial writing together one highly efficient medium of communication (cf. GARIBAY, 1992: 11-14; SULLIVAN, 1974: 99).

By this time not only a Jean de Léry admired the immense power of oral memory, and Inca Titu Cusi Yupanqui was surely being in part ironic in composing his 1570

directive for his sponsor Lope García de Castro, former governor of Peru, to deliver to Philip II: “because men’s memory is weak and fragile, if we do not have recourse to [written] letters to use them for our needs it will be impossible for us to remember completely all the extensive and important affairs that we must deal with” (2006: 4). Titu Cusi wrote to obtain as *encomienda* his forebears’ land and knew he had to adopt European usages to do so. But as he tells *his* story of conquest not just Spanish brutality and rapine emerge but the lies, cheats and abuse of writing: not least in the failed exchange between Spaniards and Titu Cusi’s uncle Atahualpa, when their scorn for his welcome irks him into casting down their proffered Gospel (10). For the Spanish this became a key act: cause and term of conquest. For Titu Cusi it was just part closure of civil war and proof of *both* sides’ perfidy toward *his* Inca line. That he had to adopt European writing despite what he knew of the power of oral memory (not to speak of his people’s partly mnemonic *quipus*) revealed a European weakness and fragility. But here I just want to signal how widespread, if locally focused, were these debates in the Americas as well.

Certainly, Elliott could justly object that debate over writing, poetry and painting was an old European one, from before Pliny, whose *Natural History* figured in the Portuguese Francisco de Hollanda’s surely genuine (Robert Clements shows) 1538 dialogues with Michelangelo. These compared sculpture and poetry and painting, to the latter’s advantage as representing the world’s divinity in its founding rational design, *desenha*, known best if not only by the painter’s *inteleito*, genius. Hollanda observes his king João III’s rule “over most distant regions of barbarian races [...] throughout the East and through all the country of the Moors,” states that in antiquity writing and painting were

synonymous and that hieroglyphs made Egyptian writing painting but nowhere cites American pictographs (1998: 80, 94). By 1548, when he wrote up his dialogues, early as it was, not a few were writing of these, but Hollanda may be more notable for Michelangelo and his friends' insistence that even "mediocre painters actually create" what "good poets do no more than say in words" and that in the "laws of painting" you "read what letters are ignorant of" (95-6): just what so many will soon be urging of pictographs. But are these last then just an optional extra? Or do they and the *areitos* not offer a decisive turn, showing an oral-visual literacy (I see no other way to put it) as the communicational ground of an advanced urban civilization? Tovar certainly so saw it, as surely did Cervantes, his mind perhaps broadened by his years in Ottoman captivity.

In Europe, Amyot, Baudouin, Patrizi, Paleotti and others admired and envied this. Here we see aesthetics, philosophy and historiography fast touched by American matter, historians above all aware that their traditions and narrative forms bore deeply on the proper address needed to make their evidence speak. To say this and practice its implications are far apart. But one thinks of African music circling to Portugal by 1451 and soon in the 1500s to Brazil. In the 1820s this hybrid returned to Portugal as *fado*, felt as voicing its people's deepest soul (REISS, 2005a: 1-8; FERRONHA, 1999). The famed fifteen-sixteenth-century ivories carved by West Africans to Portuguese pattern tell a like story (BASSANI and FAGG, 1998; BASSANI, 2008). So does Michael Booth's thesis that Thomas Harriot drew many aspects of his algebra, the most advanced of its day, from his study of Algonquian language, for which he created an alphabet "very like a phonetic algebra" (STEDALL, 2007: 383) – where "observed relationships among phonemes are

systematically correlated with observable relationships among the letter shapes that ‘encode information about the position and formation of each sound in the mouth’” (BOOTH, 2011: 47-8 citing STEDALL, 2007: 383; cf. SALMON, 1996). Its very idea may be due to a grammatical compression typical of Algonquian, and Booth gives other cases of its likely impact in Harriot’s algebra. Notable is an inflection denoting an absent or non-existent referent and its striking congruity with “Harriot’s innovation of the predictive or algebraic zero [...] paradoxically indicat[ing] a ‘this’ that isn’t here” (BOOTH, 2011: 53-4; 2003: 350-1, 356). With it Harriot built his “canonical equations” – “a repertoire of equation forms assembled so that higher-order equations could readily be solved” by derivation from like-structured lower ones, letting large “reaches of mathematical quantity” fit into a compressed mold by setting them to zero (BOOTH, 2011: 52; 2003: 350-1; 2002: 7-28; STEDALL, 2000: 467; 2003: 14-16). Alfred North Whitehead held this basic to modern mathematics (1911: 66). Language was always crucial.

Ginzburg’s dicta on Oviedo, Amyot and Baudouin in fact target the 1590s debate on English verse by Philip Sidney and others, fitting the *areitos*’ evidence for a global centrality of poetic practice into ideas vital to later western literary aesthetics (GINZBURG, 2000: 25-42). So George Puttenham held poetry’s universality “proved by certificate of merchants and travelers [...] affirming that the American, the Peru[v]ian, and very cannibal do sing and also say their highest and holiest matters in certain rhyming versicles” (2004: 65). Samuel Daniel, finding ancient English metrics and rhyme “so natural a melody [...] and so universal, as it seems to be generally born with all the nations of the world” (2004: 211), called for

the world to enjoy that which it knows, and what it likes, seeing that whatsoever form of words doth move, delight and sway the affections of men, in what Scythian sort soever it be disposed or uttered, that is true number, measure, eloquence and the perfection of speech, which I said hath as many shapes as there be tongues or nations in the world (2004: 213).

This lives on through Giambattista Vico recalling that “Tacitus in his account of the customs of the ancient Germans relates that they preserved in verse the beginnings of their history, and [Justus] Lipsius in his notes on this passage says the same of the American Indians,” going on to tie this to the “same” ancient customs of verse histories among the Persians and Chinese (1984: 158, §470).

This is not “cultural relativism,” Thomas Greene notes (1986: xii). Rather does Daniel say that under the variety of tongues, be they English or Elliott’s “Scythian,” poetry’s rhythms, melody and eloquence are universal. And if, unlike Puttenham, he does not specify America, a main source of his thoughts on cultural equality and the universality of poetic praxis was Michel de Montaigne’s “Des cannibales” (1962: 1.31), that meditation measuring European civilization against American (2004: 217-8). In the same arena Bearden’s studies of the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth century novel’s focal use of ekphrasis show how pictographs and hieroglyphs soon became essential semantic and syntactic devices in that European genre’s formative exemplars, the one for instance in Cervantes’ *Persiles*, the other in John Barclay’s *Argenis*, novels that are late (1617 and 1621 respectively) but prefigured in earlier literary artifacts in poetry and prose (2012: 140,

but all 100-57), as well as in pictorial art.

Here these authors' and historiographers' concerns come together. Walter Benjamin offers a rich clue in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, seeing later practices of symbol and allegory growing straight from sixteenth-century humanists' absorption with hieroglyphics and emblematics (widespread a century earlier). Certainly, Benjamin does not bring up pictographs nor, I think, did Pierio Valeriano in his 1556 *Hieroglyphica*, who otherwise sounds like Paleotti (or Michelangelo): "To speak hieroglyphically is nothing other than to open the nature of divine and human things" (BENJAMIN, 1977: 167-74, here 169-70; and see CURRAN, 2007: 228-34). But if Valeriano did not make the link others did, and if Benjamin and others (notably his source here, Karl Giehlow) are right to see in this long widespread humanist interest in hieroglyphs, emblems and pictographs the productive ground of new allegorical and symbolic understandings and practices (literary, in Benjamin's case), these surely underlie Sidney's, Puttenham's, Daniel's and successor debates, not to speak of ideas manifest in Cervantes, Barclay and various precursors. Two centuries later Jean-Jacques Rousseau was to repeat: "What the ancients said most vividly, they expressed not in words but in signs; they did not tell, they showed" (1970: 31). He echoed a by-then Enlightenment cliché apropos directly, it is true, of hieroglyphs, but in this context he could have said of Americans' pictographs what he did of their music: lacking degenerate, artificial modern European harmonic systems, they sang richer, more natural, more morally and emotionally exact revelations of humanity (1970: 139-41, 165, 181-5; REISS, 1997: 197-8). The debates and their terms were for centuries alive and well.

Cases are easily added. Famed is that of Philip II's doctor Francisco Hernández sent

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on scientific mission to New Spain in 1570 to cull botanical and medical data. Scholars edited parts in 1615, 1651 and later, but many of his findings remain manuscript. *Pace* some scholars (CAÑIZARES-ESGUERRA, 2006: 8, 28-31; HERNÁNDEZ, 2000: 16-26) his work was collective. By royal order *before* testing on his own he was to consult local scholars and practitioners (SOMOLINOS, 1960: 146; HERNÁNDEZ, 2000b: 46; BUSTAMENTE, 1992: 300-1). In his work echoed native research like that Martín de la Cruz and Juan Badiano (Nahua scholars of Sahagún whom he met) recorded in their “great study of medical plants, *Libellus de medicinalibus indorum herbis*” (MATHES, 1985: 18) that Philip owned from 1552 (2000). The result “straddled not just two worlds, Old and New, but also divers European traditions” (BUSTAMENTE, 1997: 241). Hernández’s resolve to analyze and *classify* his data using preconquest wisdom and Nahuatl created real intercultural scientific work (HERNÁNDEZ, 1994; LÓPEZ PIÑERO and TOMÁS, 1994: 48-57; BUSTAMENTE, 1997: 253-68, 2000: 33-6). Philip II had it edited by Nardo Antonio Recchi who, besides minor changes, redid Hernández’s taxonomies into traditional “Theophrastan categories, [and so] eliminated at a stroke Hernandez’s [...] innovations” (LÓPEZ PIÑERO and TOMÁS, 2000: 123; 1994: 59-71; cf. SOMOLINOS, 1960: 281). In another way Hernández’s choice was “conservative” in a (pre-copyright) age when people understood knowledge not as individual intellectual property (as they did by the late 1600s) but as dialogue adjusting, changing, firming up public, shared wisdom.

This very understanding may also help explain in part why so much intercultural and even transcultural dialogue has later been ignored, blocked by habits of thought bound to ownership of intellectual and artistic property. Nor is this confuted by the fact for

instance that scholars have long seen the invasions as transforming, even creating international law. Unlike other activities, this did not draw (at first) on cultures of invaded and colonized peoples but on experiences of invading and colonizing (like Petrarchism in Roland Greene's survey). Even so, studying it, David Lupher shows how digesting the experience of unknown, urbanized, imperial high cultures shattered Spaniards' understanding of themselves relative to their Roman history and law and indeed of reputed primacy of Greco-Roman culture as relayed in the textual models and palette seen by so many as dictating *all* Europeans' view of other peoples (2003: esp. 189-317). Tachot shows that those writing of the Americas saw them right away as putting Greek and Latin lore to nonstop query, even "shattering [its] sclerotic knowledge" (2001: 227). In it they saw neither infallible models nor ready means of control: while it might question facets of the Americas and of Europeans' understanding of them, no less did the Americas force questions of a familiar Antiquity. As Gómara ironized at the start of his *Historia general de las Indias*, "experience is contrary to philosophy" and what the many ships that now "go routinely from Spain to the Indies" have taught, above all the global voyage of Magellan's *Victoria*, is *la ignorancia de la sabia antigüedad*, "wise Antiquity's ignorance" (1979: 17, ch.vi).

With broader strokes, Jack Goody has European culture taking credit for creating this new science (versus Chinese) besides other political, legal, institutional, economic and ethical creation (2006). In this line of thought lies earlier work on African roots of civilization by Cheikh Anta Diop and others, sapping Europe's claim to unique cultural priority from Antiquity. Goody queries later claims of such precedence from the Middle

Ages and Renaissance while noting that “the disastrous decline of urban cultures [after] collapse” of the western Roman empire tied later Latin European growth to exchanges with Byzantium, Asia, Islamic eastern Mediterranean, north Africa and al-Andalus (2006: 69, 74-6). This fact must loom in any effort to show that “Europe” always grew in local transcultural exchanges; for most (Euro-American) moderns find it just as hard to see over horizons of expectation as allegedly did sixteenth-century people. This has made “maximalists,” holding Atlantic exertions to have fast changed Europe, a bit rare. That I am among them is incidental to my project, which concerns not western theft of others’ histories and not at all the idea that many have had their Renaissances, some even at the same time as western Europe’s, notably Ottoman Turkey (ANDREWS, 2006). This idea is now popular (SCHILDGEN et al., 2006; GOODY, 2010; and several African scholars), always making Europe’s Renaissance not just what Goody calls “iconic” but the mold for all others, bound to their “similar activities outside Europe” (2010: 42) and paying tribute, Giuseppe Mazzotta toasts, to Europe’s early Humanists’ “dream of a universal Rome” (2006: xiii).

My concern is that the centuries of a European Renaissance have simply been mistold. It is not that there have or have not been other renaissances, other essential sociocultural rebirths. It is that the “European” culture being born between, say, 1100 and 1600, was already and then always transcultural (surely like all others). For at issue is not just the familiar and now-received point that Europeans were forced by the processes, results and findings of their own expansionism to rethink interpretive strategies and their conceptual basis or, as Cristián Roa-de-la-Carrera has it (crediting many), that America (or

Africa) and the “colonial subject” were Europe’s imaginary construct (2005: 85-6), vital as are those recognitions. It is that Europeans did quickly react to, were influenced by and absorbed artifacts and processes from these different cultures. This should be entirely expected. European culture(s) had always been an *omnium gatherum*. What culture is not?

In all this, part of the trouble has always been to make 1492 an originating moment. Even Serge Gruzinski’s strong writings on the global *mestizaje* starting in mid-sixteenth century, with Anahuac as a nexus, begin with the American invasions. That Europeans found America a singular marvel is sure. But our story must start far earlier. First, the Portuguese African voyages were also trials and findings of the unknown, even if Africa (like Asia) was in theory a known place. Second, they led directly to Columbus’ transatlantic project. Third, they extended Atlantic ventures going back to early fourteenth-century rediscovery of the Canaries and, as we include Arab and other Atlantic sailing, further centuries back; back in fact before the Crusades to expansionist drives that are basic facets of a story that from its “start” mixed many cultures. So questions of influence and impact may have been wrongly put, skewed at least for post-nineteenth-century western scholars by the familiar Renaissance tale so as to reassert a wholly internal European evolution. Thus until quite recent work on al-Andalus, early Islamic impacts, like later transatlantic effects, have been at best optional extras: say, an insubstantial inlay in late humanist Italian art or exotic presence in affluent collections. Erudite as such construals are, they skim the real depth of these exchanges (BURNETT and CONTADINI, 1999). But Rosamond Mack shows how crucial were Islamic and Asian “decorative arts,” silkware and carpets, ceramic and glass, books and brass, script and scrollwork to Italian art from the

twelfth century on: so, one deduces, to the “European Renaissance.” Of course everyone has known of Ottoman and earlier Islamic influence on Venice’s architecture and arts, increasingly potent from the ninth century (PIRENNE, 1980: 178-80; HOWARD, 2000; CARBONI, 2007).

Above all for later centuries, that influence and attendant politico-economic relations have been much studied. For Henri Pirenne, while fifth-eighth-century “Western Europe was detaching herself from the east, [Venice] continued to be part of it” and “grew great” by ongoing commerce with Constantinople and its intercourse with Arab and eastern worlds, such that he came to assert that “Venice belonged to the west only by her geographical location; in the life that animated her and the spirit that inspired her, she was foreign to it” (1974: 83-4, 111-13) – though he seemed to find not a few cities with similar associations. Nicol has detailed this agelong Venetian-Byzantine world of trade, cultural and political exchange. For Frederic Lane, Venice was a maritime empire ever negotiating with other Mediterranean cultures, unique in some ways but forging rich contacts for others. For David Jacoby and Eliyahu Ashtor the city was just one knot in a tenth-fifteenth-century net of Latin, Greek, Arab and Ottoman trade, shipping, migration and settlement; a political and cultural network tying the Mediterranean’s eastern half and deep hinterlands of Egypt, the Levant and the Bosphorus. Deno Geanakoplos’ work on Byzantium’s nonstop cultural impact on Venice and the Latin West from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is as familiar.

The stunning early-fifteenth-century “notebook” of the Venetian sailor Michael of Rhodes (2009), available to scholars only in this century’s first decade, epitomizes these

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relations. In form it is not dissimilar to the Italian merchants' *ricordi* or English customals, both starting as early as the late thirteenth century as collections of business, civic and family documents and notes, gradually coming to include ethical and moral musings, advice, family history, even at times a deal of poetry (RICHARDSON, 2011: 155-6). Michael's contribution is transcultural. Born in Greek-speaking Rhodes *c.* 1385, he joined the Venetian navy as a galley oarsman in 1401 and rose fast to the highest officer ranks open to non-nobles. In 1434 he began his book in its extant form, encompassing commercial arithmetic and algebra (of whose Arab sources he was aware); calculations for dead reckoning and calendrical, astronomical and astrological needs; portolans (nautical directions) for sailing the Mediterranean and the Atlantic to England and Flanders; fleet orders; shipbuilding lessons; Latin, Venetian and transcribed-Greek prayers; and more. A year before his 1445 death he reworked it as a second book. Others, including Ramusio, later copied bits of it. His forty-three-year record of trade and naval voyages covers all Venice's main routes: with the navy in the Adriatic, Aegean, Tyrrhenian and Levant; merchant fleets to Flanders and England, the Black Sea, Aigues Mortes, Alexandria, Beirut and Constantinople. His books and genius aside, Michael typifies the age's Mediterranean maritime circulation and fertile cultural mingling. But these were ongoing already by the ninth century, as Pirenne, Balard and others have been showing for decades, even if, Ashtor shows, with a long break between the west and the Arab Levant from the eighth to the early tenth century (1978: I and II).

Relations among humanist scholarly explorations and trade and colonial maritime ones were complex. Relations among intellectual concerns and material practices, between

the often symbolic forms of the one and factual strategies of the other, are infinitely hard to negotiate. But they *must be* negotiated, for material practice is always lived and interpreted in and as signs, symbols, meanings. The nature and chronology of these interdependent intellectual and material ties were inevitably complex. Relations between Columbus' transatlantic voyage, though, and its Mediterranean and African (maybe even transatlantic) precursors were not. And the fact is that these ventures in trade, colonial and religious expansion, *eventually* coeval with humanist explorations and the state, civic, legal, diplomatic, psychological and aesthetic changes coming to accompany them, also preceded them for a good two, even three, centuries. Stumbling on the sailors' bird-islands gives a way to bridge the all-too-frequent gap between theory and practice, intellectual strategies and material events, symbolic forms and concrete acts. The islands were certainly facts. In time they became something else as well. As an intricate metaphor crossing the Arab, Ottoman, Latin and African Mediterranean, Africa more generally, and then the Atlantic, the Americas and the Indian Ocean it aids foundationally to rethink the Renaissance.

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Abstract

The history of the Mediterranean and its circumambient lands before 1492 is rife with cultural, commercial, military and religious exchanges. They go back to the seventh century with muslim expansion out of Arabia Felix across Africa and into Spain and Sicily, to a couple of centuries before that with the expansion of Byzantium, to the eleventh and twelfth centuries with gradual expansion out of Catalonia-Aragon, to just later again with Ottoman growth westward, and soon to Genoese-Portuguese trade and occupation efforts in the Canaries, eventually to Portuguese occupation of Ceuta and sailing along the west African coast. Almost all these events, even to a large degree the last, preceded the advances of Humanism that post-nineteenth-century European historiography credited with the Atlantic voyages that supposedly heralded the triumph of Latin- and then northern-European “civilization.” This fact suggests that that historiography is wrong. It says that the “European” Renaissance, held by that same historiography to be fundamentally Italo-centric, needs rethinking. But how to do so? This Renaissance has been thought of chiefly in terms of cultural processes and artifacts; in terms of changes signaled most clearly in poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, theatre, music, philosophy and the sense and experience of humanity they are taken to manifest and depict. These depend on certain means of embodiment and communication, themselves part of what the Renaissance is taken to be. If other cultures, party to the just-mentioned exchanges, lack such means, how to find their artifacts and processes, their impacts, their parts in the exchanges? A nonstop image (and fact) of ocean islands thronged with birds just waiting for European sailors to kill and stockpile them, in letters, chronicles, histories, travelers’ accounts and more from Boccaccio into the seventeenth-century, able to be traced to an earlier Arab writer, let them eventually be understood as a metaphor for Mediterranean, Atlantic and eventually yet broader processes of invasion, colonization and more general exchanges. They let one see both the fact and, to some extent, nature of genuinely transcultural exchanges, of the impact, for example, of African and American cultures quite early on on European culture, rather than the traditional reverse and one-way imposition of traditional European historiography. This essay is a version of the Introduction to that effort.

Keywords: bird-islands; global Renaissance; Atlantic invasions; cultural exchanges; early

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American impacts