

The Early Modern Global South in Print

Textual Form and the Production of
Human Difference as Knowledge



Sandra Young



LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC CULTURES OF EARLY MODERNITY

THE EARLY MODERN
GLOBAL SOUTH IN PRINT

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The Early Modern Global South in Print

Textual Form and the Production of
Human Difference as Knowledge

SANDRA YOUNG

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For Rolfe Eberhard

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Chapter 1

Introduction:

Searching the Secrets of Nature in the “South”¹

All which things may give further occasions to Philosophers to search the secrets of nature, and complexions of men, with the nouelties of the newe worlde.

(Peter Martyr, *The decades of the newe world of west India*, 1555, fol. 311r)

For sixteenth-century natural historian Peter Martyr, human difference is a phenomenon to be marveled at and investigated further. Like the alluring “secrets of nature,” human difference can be found in the “newe worlde” and its “nouelties,” which are waiting to be uncovered and explained through the knowledge practices of “Philosophers.”² His reflection on New World difference contributes to the enduring association between three elements in the early modern culture of learning: human difference (signaled, above, in his allusion to the “complexions of men”), natural history (“the secrets of nature”), and the changing cosmographies, or conceptual systems, that might shed light on it all.

The texts that emerge from this period tell a complex story of the need for new conceptual systems with which to represent geographical “discoveries” and reflect on their significance for European self-understanding and global positioning. The development of a discourse with which to consider “the southern climes” or, simply, “the south,” is strikingly evident, not only in the texts’ dependence on the imprecise and often inaccurate language of cardinal directions (in terms like “south” and “southern”) but also in the visual language of early modern book-

¹ The translator and editor of Peter Martyr’s *The decades of the newe world of west India*, Richard Eden, uses the terminology of “south” explicitly in the epistle introducing his earlier compilation, *A treatyse of the newe India* (1553). Eden talks about “the south” (sig. aa.vii.r) and “the southern partes of the world” (sig. aa.vi.r). This earlier volume, the *Treatyse*, is a compilation of excerpts from Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographiae vniversalis*. See Chapter 2 for an extended discussion of this text and its contribution to the idea of a global south in the early modern period.

² Born in Italy as Pietro Martire d’Anghiera, he was known to his English readership as Peter Martyr, the name inscribed on Richard Eden’s English translation of his compilation *De orbe novo*, published in English in 1555 as *The decades of the newe world of west India*. He was a chronicler of the Spanish empire, commissioned as royal chronicler to Queen Isabella of Spain and later Charles, the Holy Roman Emperor. He was famously the first to challenge Columbus on whether or not he had indeed reached the Indies. Nicolás Wey Gómez describes him as “the earliest known chronicler of the Indies ... who instantly doubted whether Columbus had sailed far enough to have reached the Indies” (136).

making, as I aim to show. In sixteenth-century textual representations of new worlds, we see the development of mechanisms with which to represent human subjects from far-off lands, mechanisms that turn them into objects of curiosity, on the page. Equivalences are set up between regions of the world, many of them long known to European explorers, in terms, I will argue, that establish an implicit divide between the “north” and the “south,” attributing alterity to the “southern parts” of the world. The central concern of this book emerges from the observation of the emergence of a “global south” on the pages of the compilations that set out the new geographical landscape in early modernity.

The period’s self-consciously “scholarly” texts helped to authorize in print the first imaginings of “new” worlds, and decades of careful scholarship have alerted us to some of the ways in which these texts established insidious ideas about European superiority. *The Early Modern Global South in Print* contributes to that body of work by considering the representational practices with which perceived human difference was inscribed into the texts through the language of an emergent geography, and formalized as “knowledge.” In particular, I will argue that the language of cardinal points offered early modern intellectuals a conceptual grid with which to signal perceptions of human difference that came into view – indeed, came into being at all – as a result of European exploration.³ In examining the structural hermeneutics at work in the volumes that described the newly “expanded” world in print, we can observe at work some of the assumptions underpinning inscriptions of alterity in this period and the contribution of an emergent geographical system that could divide the world into a putative “south” and “north.”

Scholars do not agree about the most appropriate language to use when trying to fathom the ways in which human difference is invoked, or if it is even appropriate to do so at all. In an essay that provocatively asks the question “Does the Other Exist?” Alain Badiou casts aspersions on the intellectual preoccupation with difference. He identifies in the “culturalism” that informs contemporary ethics “a tourist’s fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs” that is “directly inherited from the astonishment of the colonial encounter with savages” (26). The “whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned” in favor of “recognizing the Same” (25). Badiou’s suspicion of scholarly fascination with perceived cultural difference, and his impatience with the empty piety of human rights discourse and its anti-intellectualism, are no doubt warranted. However, his characterization of the early modern encounter and its legacy for thought calls for further probing. The early modern encounter with human difference was not a single event or even a series of events, alike in their effects. Furthermore, Badiou’s challenge makes it necessary to distinguish clearly between critical scrutiny of the emergence of

³ As Myra Jehlen points out, “while the Aztecs and the Spanish certainly existed before their encounter, the difference between them did not. *That* was the creature of the conquest” (*Readings at the Edge of Literature* 163).

cultural difference and what he calls the “preoccupation” with “recognition of the other” (27) by the scholar whose good intentions do little to address the pejorative assumptions that undergird inimical binarisms.

The representation of human difference in early modernity goes beyond the discursive binaries (“self” and “other”) that postcolonial scholars have done so much to bring under critical scrutiny,⁴ or the racial categories that continue to generate rigorous debate and illuminating scholarship in the field of early modern studies.⁵ The terminology of postcolonialism has been useful to scholars concerned to trace imperialist relations of power in the formation of categories of thought and practice in early modernity. Early modernity provides a rich period case study for an analysis of how power relations play themselves out in the knowledge practices and cultural expressions of an increasingly secular world, as early modern scholars have shown. For example, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin have drawn our attention to the “shared intellectual history” between postcolonial theory and “revisionist early modern scholarship,” and have rightly called for more “politically invested” engagement with the period (11). However, dependence on terminology that can only ever be applied retrospectively through the ravages of nineteenth-century colonialism makes it hard to attend to the particular hermeneutical mechanisms at work in the volumes themselves, as representational battlegrounds. More recently, new vocabularies have made themselves available with which to understand the impact of early modern texts in representing the connected histories of peoples across the globe and thereby helping to shape global relations of power. Daniel Vitkus has drawn on the trope of conversion to argue that the early modern Mediterranean world was much more complex and interconnected than postcolonialism’s language of positionality can account for. His influential study *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* takes issue with the tendency of early modern scholars “to read ‘representations of the Other’ according to a teleological historiography of Western domination, conquest and colonization” (5), a historiography that cannot account for, or even recognize, the more complex web of engagement between

⁴ See, for example, Tzvetan Todorov, whose influential study of early America, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, explicitly draws on the language of postcolonialism (1984). Peter Hulme deploys colonial discourse analysis to powerful effect in *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797*, engaging a productive debate with Myra Jehlen regarding representations of alterity and the historicity of cannibalism (see Jehlen, *Readings at the Edge of Literature*). More recently, postcolonial binaries themselves have come under scrutiny. As Daniel Vitkus has argued, the “binary opposition between colonized and colonizer, so familiar in recent scholarship informed by postcolonial identity politics, cannot be maintained in a properly historicized description of England’s early modern culture” (2).

⁵ In the “Afterword: Race and Racism in Early Modernity,” I consider some recent arguments regarding the appropriateness, or not, of using the terminology of “race” for the period, versus “blood” (as in Jean Feerick’s title, *Strangers in Blood*) or “lineage” (Hendricks, “Race” 537) or “skin color” (Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 101).

England and the increasingly imperialist Ottoman Turks in the Mediterranean world.⁶ This marks a departure from an earlier swath of scholarship that tended to view the encounters that resulted from European travel in the early modern period as a collision between incommensurable worlds and peoples. At least, this is the way Daniel Carey characterizes an influential body of scholarly work from the 1980s and 1990s that produced what he calls the “consensus view in studies of early modern travel” – that is, that “the encounter between cultures” made visible an “incommensurability” that “tends to be conceptualized [by scholars] as absolute” (“Questioning Incommensurability” 33). On the contrary, Carey argues, the texts that advised English travelers in managing the difficulties associated with travel, the *ars apodemica* of Carey’s study, paint a rather different picture: “the perspective that emerges in these writings suggests the potential interchangeability of self and other rather than the radical opposition between the two that ostensibly structured the occasion” (34). In fact, Carey would argue, it is precisely the awareness of possible *correspondences* and the fear of English susceptibility to the influence of foreign cultures and practices that set off an anxiety surrounding cultural contact and assertions of a form of difference that a careful reading of the text shows was not so absolute.⁷

Carey implies that twentieth-century interpreters of early modern exploration narratives were too easily taken in by the narratives’ assertions, and did not attend to the texts’ more reflexive and contradictory moments, which tell a different story. Early modern “[r]epresentatives of the metropolitan culture may have attempted to assert incommensurability and to enforce cultural distinctness through legal and other measures, but they did so in the face of evidence to the contrary” (“Questioning Incommensurability” 33). By reading more widely and more skeptically, Carey alerts us to evidence that contradicts the dominant narrative. Even counter-examples, however, do not take us beyond a dichotomous framework. Without trying to understand the terms and representational strategies with which the early moderns made sense of their increasingly complicated world in print, we risk remaining locked into adjudicating between commensurability and incommensurability, or to categorizing degrees of perceived alterity in terms of our own making (“self” and “other”).

For Myra Jehlen, it is not necessary to look for evidence of mutuality in early modern texts to counter the idea of incommensurability; it is precisely the charge of “inhumanity” in early modern descriptions of indigenous Americans – the “bloodthirsty Caribs” – that paradoxically reveals the Europeans’ *recognition* of the Americans’ humanity: “Were inhumanity a fact it would preclude a self-

⁶ See also footnote 10 in Chapter 2 for a brief discussion of Jerry Brotton’s important contribution to conceptualizations of early modern cultural, political, and economic relations based on the trope of the “bazaar.”

⁷ Carey argues that “commentators worried about the impact of travel precisely because they accepted the commensurability of human beings, and therefore the capacity of the English to become like those they observed and with whom they lived” (“Questioning Incommensurability” 40).

justifying condemnation” (*Readings at the Edge of Literature* 152).⁸ For Jehlen, the scholarly commitment to softening the perceived “otherness” of the indigenous Americans is misplaced; it may even constitute a new form of “effacement” (171). There is no need to rescue the indigenous Americans from their characterization as “Other” by moderating their “radical otherness and transform[ing] it into relative difference” (159), for example by disavowing the possibility that alterity as radical as cannibalism existed historically.⁹ The ostensibly laudable interpretative endeavor of certain modes of postcolonial scholarship might, paradoxically, make it impossible to see resistance and might bolster, instead, the standing of the modern day scholar: “the recuperation of the self-definition – or, more broadly, the agency – of the conquered has been the central principle of the postcolonial scholarship that precisely thereby enlists itself in decolonization” (171). Jehlen proposes a method of reading “that uncovers the agency of the colonized even though the texts ... are virtually always and only the colonizers’ narratives” (171). In doing so, she invites us to revise any well-intentioned aversion to the possibility of alterity.

I find this salutary. Even so, there is more to be understood about the field of difference into which the early moderns consigned the peoples they encountered across the seas and themselves. To this end I extend my critical reading into what book historian Roger Chartier calls the “*espaces lisibles*” (or readable spaces) that exist beyond the traditional domain of literary studies. Chartier urges textual critics to attend to these readable spaces using a methodology that “combines textual criticism, bibliography, and cultural history” (*The Order of Books* 3). Elements like tables, chapter headings, images, and maps form a significant aspect of a text’s hermeneutics and contribute to its unspoken rhetorical force. My concern in this study has been to read the books themselves and not just the sentences they contain – their structural mechanisms, the histories of their component parts, the intellectual paradigms established in their terminology, their images, their indices and tables – in order to examine the explanatory frameworks the early modern savants constructed for making sense of perceived differences across the globe. I argue that the language of cartography made itself available as a conceptual grid within which to place the peoples of the world, without having to resolve

⁸ As Jehlen sees it, “the Caribs/cannibals need to be granted a portion of humanity before they can be seen worthy of annihilation for their inhumanity. Thus it is their categorical humanity that places them beyond the pale” (*Readings at the Edge of Literature* 152).

⁹ Jehlen’s well-known debate with Peter Hulme takes issue with Hulme’s method of exposing, through colonial discourse analysis, the unreliability of European accounts of cannibalism; for by “dismissing the possibility of cannibals, Hulme does not just erase this sign of alterity, he writes over it” (*Readings at the Edge of Literature*, 171). (See Hulme.) To appreciate fully the Americans’ potential resistance to European modes of being and thus to “qualify difference,” Jehlen charges, “we need to know more about its content, not less” (159). Similarly, for Jehlen, Tzvetan Todorov’s reading of Columbus’s diaries, and his commitment to exposing the Europeans’ manipulation of language and power in the face of the Americans’ relative artlessness, risks repeating the misrecognition that he condemns in Columbus.

degrees of difference. The lexicon of “manners” and “customs” – that is to say, human geography – provided a seemingly measured language and a code for presenting “diverse” practices that could nonetheless be understood in relation to the unexplained norm of the European observer whose way of life did not require explanation. Furthermore, the language of cartography provided a seemingly dependable system with which to differentiate across geopolitical spaces.

During the course of this book, I argue that the early chronicles of European exploration, such as Peter Martyr’s *The decades of the newe world of west India* (1555) and Richard Eden’s English compilation of Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographiae vniversalis*, his *A treatyse of the newe India* (1553), construct a global social hierarchy through the lexicon of an emergent geography: the language of the global “south.”¹⁰ The texts subtly set up equivalences, on the page, between regions in the global south, equivalences that gathered plausibility with each new iteration, positioning the peoples of the world’s “torrid zones” in deprecatory conceptual categories.

Through a lexicon that derives from the geographical purchase on a wider world, the texts help to position the unfamiliar and far-off peoples of the “torrid zones” within a global social hierarchy. This deployment of a vague but seemingly unimpeachable cartographic system has devastating implications for the global south: for under Eden’s pen, the south veritably *invites* exploitation, for both wealth and learning.

Strategies for Representing the “South”

Some of the sixteenth-century texts under discussion in this book deploy the cardinal descriptors “south” and “the southern parts of the world,” explicitly, to point to regions on the margins of the known world, often without specificity, substance, or accuracy. Other texts create equivalences across regions through textual ordering and layout. These equivalences are legible in their tables of content, or through the transposition of images relating one part of the world to another. These textual features contributed to the cultural production of the southern regions of the world and the racialized imaginary within which they were understood.

The Early Modern Global South in Print is animated by the conviction that early modern compilers’ attempts at explaining human diversity are legible within the pages of their volumes. I examine the representational mechanisms they deployed in presenting the peoples of the south as objects of an inquiring gaze from the north, reframing human difference as scientific knowledge as they did so. In the chapters that follow, I analyze the many textual elements that signaled

¹⁰ The cardinal directions “east” and “west” have similarly provided a lens through which to read global relations, following a long historiographical tradition, reignited for scholarship through Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979). See, for example, Mary Baine Campbell’s *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600*, whose chapters are structured into two parts, titled “The East” and “The West” (1995).

scholarly seriousness – indices, tables, headings, epistles, woodcut images, maps, the categorizing terms, and framing devices – and reflect on their contributions to the construction of a global social hierarchy. By tracking these early methodologies in the lines of beauty and evidence on the page, we can see how early modern producers of “knowledge” shaped an expanding world and secured their own place within it.

Each chapter considers, in turn, the methodologies, or “artes,” deployed in crossing oceans of difference on the pages of early modern compilations of exploration narratives; these “artes” include illustrating and mapping a wider world, charting for navigation, noting down observations, collecting curiosities, reporting events, formatting materials, and editing and translating old sources. In Chapter 2, I develop my proposition that the terms derived from cartography’s seemingly unchanging coordinates, and the language and evidentiary practices of an emergent geography, contribute significantly to the imperialist hermeneutics of these volumes. Their stories of European encounters in the “southern partes” of the world, I argue, helped to build a new imaginary within which to conceptualize human difference across the globe. Their dependence on a geographical lexicon helped to position the less empowered regions of the world as objects of knowledge. The texts themselves create the possibility of reading regions identifiable as “southern” through the equivalences they establish between diverse places across a putative “south” whose alterity can be subtly signaled with vague reference to geographical positioning.

In Chapter 3, “Picturing New Worlds,” I consider the impact of the early modern visual inscriptions and the mechanisms for positioning the peoples of Africa, America, and India as objects of knowledge and curiosity. The woodcut images that were deployed within early geographies and on maps helped to establish the racialized imaginary within which the people of the south became known. One of the first sets of images of the peoples of Africa and the “new” world was a series of woodcuts by Hans Burgkmair, published initially as an independent wall frieze (1508). Their reappearance within varied textual forms over the next century provides an intriguing case study of the impact of textual structure and context on imperialist intelligibility. Arranged within a single broadsheet, *De novo mondo*, the Burgkmair images helped to fuel a partisan “new world” discourse and establish equivalences between regions of the global south, many of them long known to Europeans.

In Martin Waldseemüller’s *Cosmographiae Introductio* of 1507, similarly, the language assumes a connection between diversely located regions that can be grouped under a single pronoun (“they” or “these”). This little volume introduces readers to the principles of cosmography so that they can read Waldseemüller’s new World Map, published at the same time. Waldseemüller’s cosmographical explanations place disparate regions within an emergent “south” together, in opposition to the world already known to Europe – “the farthest part of Africa, the islands of Zanzibar, the lesser Java, and Seula” – regions whose southerliness is not necessarily established in absolute terms. In Chapter 4, which considers

the process of “Mapping the Whole World” in early modernity, I examine Waldseemüller’s paired texts of 1507 – the little *Cosmographiae Introductio* and the enormous 12-sheet wall map, famously the first to label the newly “discovered” continents of “America” – for the insights they give us into the epistemologies that inform early modern cartography. Waldseemüller’s hybrid cosmography (part astronomy, part geography) can imagine the earth within a vast cosmos, offering the mind’s eye a view well past the horizon’s limit point. What predominates in Waldseemüller’s volume is the all-seeing scale of astronomy, with its language of mathematical precision and schematic renderings of a measurable globe. However, Waldseemüller’s map depends utterly upon the narrative mode of Vespucci’s account and its “new world” discourse in his representation of encounters with human inhabitants.

Waldseemüller’s mapmaking derives its authority, in part, from recent explorers’ narrative accounts, which are shown to be more up to date and more reliable than the elegant argument of university-bound scholars of old. In drawing our attention to the evidentiary authority upon which he bases his innovations, Waldseemüller shows how early modern cartography had to contend with the unsettling recognition of human habitation. Cartography’s privileged view – the view from the heavens, so to speak – had to allow room for the earthbound view that predominates in the narrative accounts, for better and for worse.

The volumes that publicized mariners’ accounts took on a bolder epistemological purpose than personal narrative might be assumed to carry. Chapter 5, “Navigating across Oceans,” is concerned with the printed “voyages” as the occasion for developing a language and method with which to account for the natural world and manage the encounter with difference. Textual “navigations” were burdened with establishing authoritatively a method for “knowing” the world across the oceans. The role of the compilers in gathering, translating, and introducing the texts within their volumes is significant in establishing objects of knowledge and in signaling how these objects of knowledge might be taken up by expansionist Europe. Like the first readers of these “voyages,” we are invited to imagine the volumes as handbooks, for use on actual voyages and in the drawing up of maps that chart a navigable world. The books do more than recount the voyages, therefore; they help to establish the language, the categories, and the representational forms that evolve in the pursuit of knowledge that can accommodate what is unfamiliar.

The relationship between experimental knowledge practice and partisan expansionism finds its ambitious height in the period’s treatises of navigation. The specific textual focus of Chapter 5 is Martín Cortés’s *The arte of navigation*. This ambitious text of 1553 aims to describe the position of the world in the heavens, and to set out the mathematical and astronomical tools for the purposes, amongst other things, of enabling successful navigation. It is explicitly directed towards the *practice* of navigation and the development of a set of tools and instruments with which to achieve safer and more accurate expeditions. The text is preoccupied with the shape of the world and the need to find an idiom with which to monitor it and know it, securely, in the face of its ever-shifting landscapes. In probing